クロックワーク・プラネット

II

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「ぬぅ!?　リューズに似合う水着か――くっ、悩ましい！」
駅前のショーウィンドウに飾られた
マネキンを睨んで、馬鹿が唸っている。
「こっち……いや、これ――
何を着ても素材が良すぎるから
むしろ水着が哀れかッ!?」
「さようですね――
元々水着など残念な体型の方々を考慮し、
その残念体型を補助すべく設計されているものです。
わたしのような完全造形ともなればむしろ余分、
この身に釣り合うものを探すのは極めて困難でしょう」

『相対機動（ミュート・スクリーム）』
『絶対機動（ブラッディ・マーダー）』
リューズはそっとスカートの裾をつまんで一礼し、
アンクルはただ獣のように手足を使って地に伏せ、
婚姻の誓いのように。
悲嘆の叫びのように。
この世でもっとも異端で冒涜的な終句を口にする。
直後。二機の伝説は激突した。

見浦ナオト
Naoto Miura

リューズ
RyuZU

マリー・ベル・ブレゲ
Marie Bell Breguet

アンクル
AnchoR

ヴァイネイ・ハルター
Vainney Halter

contents

プロローグ　バック・スイーパー　--:--　014

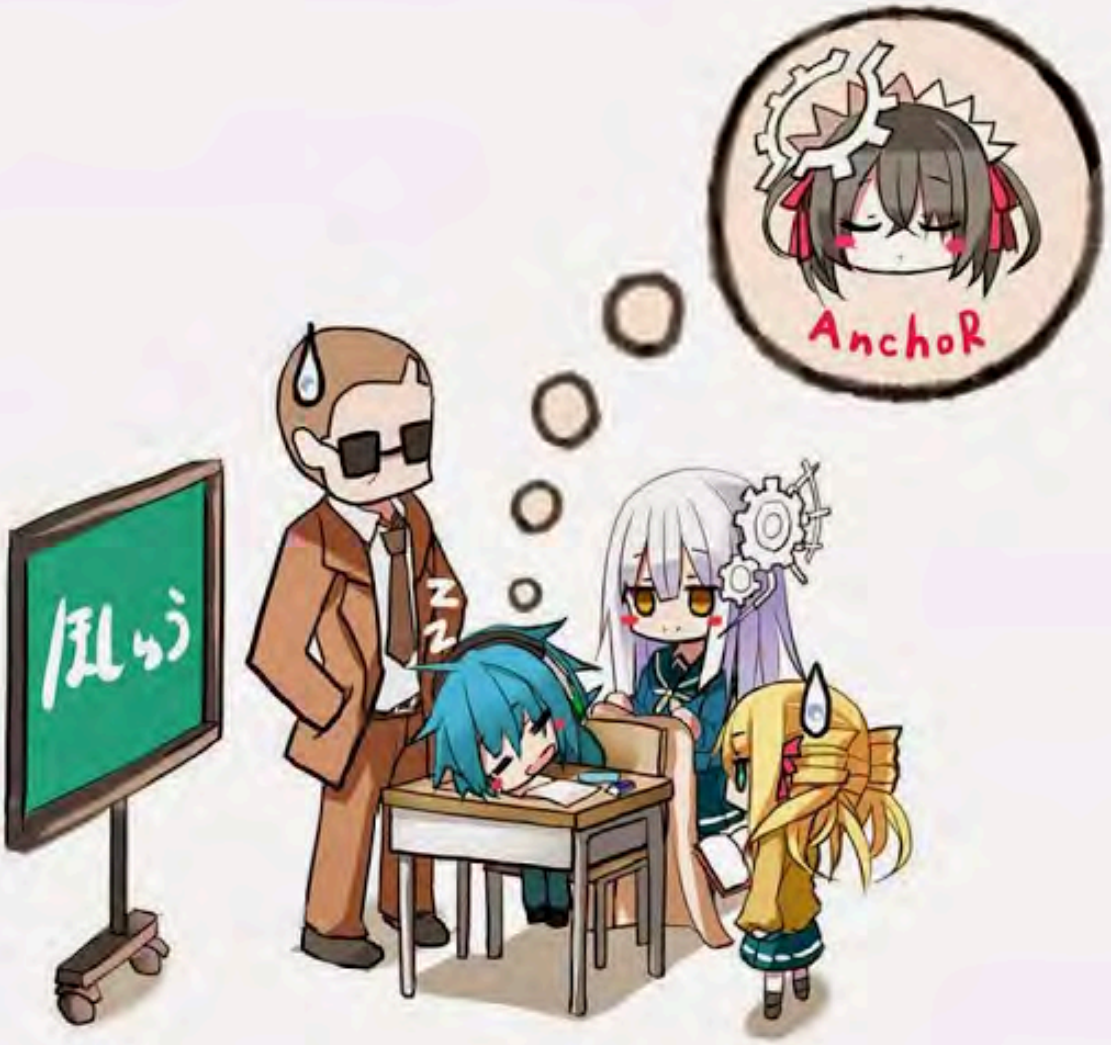
第1章　グーパー　14:30　041

第2章　サーチャー　18:10　080

第3章　アヴェンジャー　23:20　149

第4章　リターナー　00:00　240

インタールード　アウト・ブレイカー　04:30　320



Clockwork Planet Volume 02

Prologue – Back Sweeper

In this universe, 'Eternity' does not exist.

This is the Truth. An absolute unchanging basic principle.

This is not a topic of another notion.

If there is a beginning, there is an end; this is hailed as the truth, and also a massive realistic line.

It is the same as us being born for no reason, us dying in such worthless manners.

This ever-changing universe will be burned to nothingness, it is just a matter of when.

While the universe is expanding faster than light, the massive energy is being depleted at an unimaginable rate.

This is called the end of the 'thermal death'.

Unlike what the term implies, a universe that cease to expand may end up being at absolute zero.

Of course, this is merely one of the models of eschatology we have imagined.

Humans have foolishly depleted time, intelligence, talent, and given the countless number of gears that form this universe—the laws of physics, we can deduce that such an end may come.

We will meet our demise; it is only a matter of time.

Humans, the universe, everything that exists will meet the same ending.

This is a natural causation effect based on thermal physics, one without need for proof.

–However, perhaps we cannot consider it this way.

If the Truth is that Eternity does not exist,

It will be impossible for the Truth itself to be Eternal.

This is probably what 'he' thought.

And then, he had this thought,

"In that case, why don't we fix it?"

–The world permits paradoxes.

This entire scenario was simply a case of antinomy, an illogical subjective coherency.

Even after picking up on the latest hypotheses, Science is a teaching that constantly updates itself with new terms—it was simply a certain type of religion, but that was fully an issue of another dimension.

This thing called the universe—is actually so illogical after all.

This was what it seemed to 'him', at least.

That this universe is still in ebauche, so Physics itself was a crippled theme.

If he were to do something to the extraordinarily massive base movement,

And if he were to change its movement completely, what sort of distortion would there be?

For example, if he were to change a single gear.

If that were to occur without creating paradoxes in Euclid's geometry, the current universe would operate on completely different laws and continue running without a hitch.

There were many people in history who thought of such things.

However, there was only one person who had the ridiculous talent of turning this into reality.

His name was 'Y'.

A mysterious talent who, through the use of gears, recreated the Earth that had suffered 'thermal death' and died.

The best clock technician in all of humanity, who created the 'Clockwork Planet'.

–With such a ridiculous theory, 'he' established the greatest, monumental accomplishment ever since the beginning of time.

It was so unrealistic it could be a legend amongst the mythology.

However, the current reality could not be denied. Earth, supposedly dead, is now living on gears.

Tick tock, tick tock—the clock hands continued to turn.

A thousand years passed after that–

(…The tobacco stinks.)

'He' curled his lips as he narrowed his mechanical eyes.

The room was devoid of light, and it was pitch dark, yet he could see the tobacco flame as clear as day due to the light condensing function in his prosthetic eye, and silently exhales some smoke.

It was a strong man in his prime.

To be precise, he was a cyborg of that age. The thick frame was covered with muscle gears all over it, and a tight-fitting black rubber suit was wrapped around his power-type body.

His name was Vermouth.

That was not his real name—but a codename. He was an agent for a certain company.

However, due to a blunder during his youth, he lost his original body and normal life.

"…"

The sigh was mixed with with a purple haze.

Theoretically, he should not be smoking in the midst of a battle.

The tobacco flame was easy to spot, and would leave a stench behind. As for health issues…this was not the problem.

Even so, Vermouth continued to smoke. This was his superstition.

The flame burned silently, and he inhaled some smoke before exhaling it out again.

The scent of smoke certainly filled his body, buried in the midst of gears.

Using that scent, Vermouth could determine his own luck.

That—was not a good scent.

He asked,

"…Amaretto. Is my memory mistaken? Our job entails us staying here until the next morning, right?"

Through the darkness, he stared at a corner.

The shadow crouched at the thick steel door responded,

"Can you please not pressure me like that? Senior Vermouth?"

That person answered sarcastically.

Like Vermouth, he too was dressed in a black rubber suit to blend with the darkness, his pale face the only thing showing. He was a young, lanky man.

Without looking back, he continued to work on multiple tools with his hands, and said,

"It'll take time to get this unreactive gear lock to ring. Will be bad if you ejaculate too early."

"The tobacco smiles disgustingly shitty, Amaretto."

Vermouth snorted as he shook his massive frame.

"We got to hurry up with our work and put out the fires under our feet. If we don't hurry with this, we'll have guns pointed at our butts here."

"…I've been thinking, Senior Vermouth Is there a special reason for you to be smoking when you have been converted completely into a cyborg? You can't taste anything, right?"

"I don't know whether you're an idiot, or I'm an idiot for trusting an idiot like you to watch my back? The smoke is not to be felt by the tongue, but by a man's soul."

"It only that Galliano can maintain his tar-filled artificial lungs and be touched by that, huh?"

"That guy's just an old virgin who sold his soul to god. He's not a man–"

–Immediately afterwards.

Vermouth suddenly kept quiet, and in an instance, drew his gun from his waist.

His icy face showed no signs of tomfoolery. With a sharp glare, he pointed the gun at the ceiling.

At the same time, Amaretto too turned his back to the wall and readied his gun. He did not sense anything, but his senior, Vermouth had responded as such—this was ample reason to react, and there was no doubt about it.

Both of them pried their eyes amidst the darkness, being on their guard, ready to respond whenever ready.

And so, with a snap,

A slight rattling could be heard from the duct in a corner of the ceiling.

The duct cover was moved aside, and a woman showed her face.

Dressed in a tight-fitting black rubber suit, just like the duo, was a silver short-haired female cyborg.

Vermouth sighed, and lowered his gun.

Amaretto returned to the door again and began to work. At that moment, the woman landed on the floor quietly in a fluid motion, akin to fresh cream being squeezed out.

“What now, Strega?”

“No can do. This door is located in an independent place after all.”

She—Strega, dusted her clothes as she answered.

“The barrier is like an air-raid shelter there. I can’t check out the inside through sonar. I entered the ducts too, even the other systems like the air-conditioning, but a mosquito can’t even get inside, let alone a rat.”

As Vermouth nodded, Strega continued on,

"It looks like they got something they really want to hide, not just a security function that is for show or made out of insanity. I can't even fathom this place being a simple warehouse. Well, that's why we're here, right?"

"Another suspicious looking job? Shit…no wonder the smoke's so bad."

Their mission was to investigate a certain factor

It was not rare for an unknown factory to be listed under a dummy factor.

The 5 Great Enterprises had the power to govern over the fates of any other enterprise.

But it would be a different case altogether if they were consuming one-tenth of the city's power, and other resources like fresh water.

Who exactly was giving the instructions?

What were they actually creating?

What was the objective, exactly?

They had to ascertain what was right, and what was not. This was not to pursue the benefits for their own company. It was a necessity for crisis control and safety assurance, part of their daily duties.

However—

The trio quietly conversed using the disguised close-ranged 'resonating gears'.

"The outside is the backbone company working under the 'military', but from how it looks, this place place looks like it's tightly guarded like a Central Bank when it only needs a Private Military Company to manage it. We can't even

grasp the background even after sneaking all the way in. It's not easy, but there has to be a limit."

Vermouth communicated as he lit a second cigarette.

"…The only ones able to set up such a facility in secret are either the 5 Great Enterprises or the 'military'."

"Yeah, but we'll scratch our own company from the list since they did send us here. It is strange—"

While Strega muttered skeptically to herself, Amaretto answered,

"Those energetic guys are involved too? Didn't they just get their butts stabbed by that Breguet Princess to the point of bleeding?"

"Seriously? Thanks to the fact that the supposedly dead Princess is still alive, it basically caused a fire on every armory, from the Vachrons to the 'Guild', heads were flying."

"To the public, she's undoubtedly dead, at least."

Vermouth shrugged, and continued,

"The corporate funeral was already held. I sneaked into that event casually, and the speeches from the president and eldest daughter was so touching it induced tears. There's no way anyone can change that story now."

"In other words, nobody can complain for being killed by someone else now? That's quite a long one."

"That's not it."

Amaretto interrupted,

"There was no proof of Marie Bell Breguet's involvement in that terrorist information leak. If she had died before it actually happened, there's no way there'll be proof that she had participated in it."

"That has nothing to do with it, right?"

Strega snapped back sharply.

"It's weird—with that, that means we have enough proof right? For our industry's standards."

"There's no doubt that she's really guilty, but that's not the question here. She managed to complete such an operation without leaving any traces behind– that's an important factor here."

"…What do you mean?"

"If she's able to commit such a major incident in secrecy, it probably means that she's still in deep contact with her own family—the Breguet Corporation, and there's a high chance of them supporting her in the background."

Amaretto patiently explained,

"If we kill her now, it means we'll automatically be enemies against the Breguets. Even if they can't openly protest—actually, that's an unnecessary risk."

"Whether they do oppose us or not, they're the ones who will cause the commotion, right?"

"We can't necessarily say that. For example, the main culprits behind that Kyoto incident are the Vachrons and the 'military', but the other companies have given consent through silence. If they never tried to stop it, that means they're equally guilty."

"Even if that includes revenge? Isn't that way overboard?"

"It certainly is an unprecedented incident, and thanks to that, we got the main conspirators heads flying—but on the other hand, it means that's not even the deepest secret."

"So all that for such…?"

As Strega widened her eyes, Amaretto continued,

"The real 'classified information' that can topple the organization has yet to be revealed. Once everything is clear, society will be overturned. The only thing told to us is that it is something of an 'open secret'."

"…Maybe it's just that they don't know, right?"

"Probably."

Vermouth let out a sigh,

"But maybe that's not it. This sort of terrorist information leak will be unreal if it happens to this extent. I guess we can assume that it was only a warning."

Amaretto nodded with a bitter grain,

"I don't want to be the enemy of a Princess who's becoming hysteric after getting her butt rubbed lightly."

"Are you changing your target of sarcasm for the sake of the world?"

Strega shot an icy stare at Amaretto.

"Shut up and open that thing up already!"

"Okay okay—it's done now. Kept you waiting."

Amaretto answered with his real voice.

And with a thud, a heavy sound echoed, the steel door slowly sliding to the sides.

"Alright, we got Sambuca activated. Get in!"

Vermouth and gang spun the support-type automata that was sleeping in a corner of the room, activating it, and entered through the thick heavy doors.

●

And then,

They found something they had never seen before.

"—Impossible."

Vermouth let out a hoarse voice, his breathing frantic.

"Is-is such a thing, possible…?"

He could not believe the information displayed in his eyes, and shook his head,

—To summarize.

The giant safe they spent lots of effort to open was 'empty'.

Is the mission over? The giant space, used as a workplace, was empty. The numerous manufacturing equipment, giant cranes, ladders were left behind in a tidy, lonely state.

Vermouth and his gang proceeded into this emptied work place.

There was also a research lab and a room with lots of papers and terminals deep inside the area.

…Over there was the remaining data .

They felt a chill from the glimpse they had,

"…If all these are facts, this isn't a problem that can be settled by sacrificing one or two cities."

If this went badly.

The thing called the 'Clockwork Planet' will—

"Anyway, senior Vermouth, let's copy the data and get out of here. We can investigate the details later. It'll be bad now if we can't get this intel back…"

Amaretto, having calmed down quickly, said so.

Having made contact with such dangerous information they themselves could not deal with, they had to make such a simple decision as quickly as possible—

Vermouth and Strega recovered thanks to these words, but just when they were about to take photos of the data—

—At that instance.

"!?"

The trio had been converted to cyborgs.

But they felt an unbelievable aberration in their bodies that were covered by artificial skin.

It was an intangible—skin tingling, animal-like, instinctive feeling.

That was 'fear'.

The trio, highly professional agents, felt their bodies freeze.

—It was worrying.

There definitely was 'something' outside the room, inside the thick darkness.

It was small, extremely small—yet it had an unexpected scent of violence.

The trio quickly dispersed without a word. They went deep into the room, seemingly wanting to escape.

Without any discussion beforehand, they chose not to draw their guns, but to use their Coil Spears instead.

The Coil Spear.

It is a blade that vibrates at a rapid rate, and could be converted into a small firearm, even a shotgun and a grenade launcher; it was the strongest human portable weapon when considering both practicality and firepower. If a normal person were to use it proficiently, he would be able to match a military automata.

Also, for the cyborg trio, this was a weapon they could use to fight back even if the enemy was a heavy arms automata.

But it, being a product of the latest clockwork technology, could not be created by anyone other than the 5 Great Enterprises. However, since it did contain unique characteristics of each company's technology, there was the risk of them revealing their affiliation easily.

Their job was to infiltrate; using it would represent a failure in their mission.

However,

They immediately made the decision to use it.

—There was no hope of surviving without using it. There was also a reason to survive at all costs, rather than to die like that.

As professionals, the trio made the decision based on the current situation and previous incidents.

(—No, it's just an excuse now, right?)

Vermouth grimaced in his heart, and found his hand trembling.

Who exactly would be outside the room?

The cyborg trio optimized for combat—was forced to draw their strongest weapon out of 'fear'.

(…The room sure is small.)

Vermouth activated the laser, sonar functions in his mechanized body as he analyzed the situation.

It was a secluded room. There was only one exit. The source of their worry was standing outside the door, not surrounding them.

(If we're going to use Sambuca to fight the enemy and gain us some time, there's a chance we can escape, even if it's the worst case scenario of having to break through.)

Sambuca, the support-type automata that was supporting Vermouth's group.

It was a lightweight automata with the appearance of a human male. Its parts comprise on local civilian products that could disguise their affiliation once it is abandoned. After some modifications from the Gazell Vermouth and his group, its functions were competent against a military automata.

…He had already thought of an escape plan from the moment he stepped into the room.

There was no need for word nor communication. The trio exchanged glances, and nodded.

Creak—

The door opened softly.

Vermouth, having deemed his planed course of action upon seeing the enemy's silhouette, appeared from his hiding spot.

But his thoughts ceased once he spotted the 'enemy'.

Standing in front of the ajar door was the thing they were concerned by.

The one that brought about undoubted fear upon them was a little—

(…Kid—?)

It was an automata.

A little girl model with an alluring body one would like to pet as a doll.

She had neither armor nor restraining tools on her slender limbs; she was in a massive, devastating armor.

Her long hair extended to her feet, the color bloody. Her cute, adolescent face had a savage mask over it.

Through that mask, their stares met.

That was what he felt.

"—Sanbuca!"

Vermouth shouted.

His instincts were screaming at him to scrap the plan and eliminate it immediately.

"Plan D3. Stop that thing!!"

Plan D3—a command to restrain the target with the primary goal of self-destruction.

Sambuca got to action quickly and quietly.

This support-type automata was equipped with a silencer function, and was not used for direct combat in the first place.

But it could still embrace the enemy and stop it temporarily in the first place.

If there was a way to stop the enemy's movements for just an instance, Vermouth's group would focu s their Coil Spears fire on Sambuca, perforating it—

—However.

The girl automata raised her right arm.

Appearing above it was a black solid gear cube floating in the air.

It was spinning.

It continued to twist and spin, becoming two cylindrical items, a heavy reloading sound echoing.

At that moment, before their senses could detect this brief sound.

Sambuca's mechanical frame that was grabbing the masked girl—vanished along with the floor.

"—Huh?"

It was unknown who let out such a sound.

But the masked girl wordlessly glanced at the trio.

No matter whether Vermouth was willing to accept it, he understood as he was exposed to such a nonchalant, icy stare.

—They had no chances of winning.

He accepted this fact with apprehension.

"Tch, destroy the wall!"

He growled without looking back.

With such a powerful enemy present, and if they cannot escape from the only escape possible, they could only increase the number of exits.

"I'll hold her off! Cover me!"

Strega activated her double gear.

She immediately leapt out from her hiding spot, kicked the walls and ceiling, and swung blade-form Coil Spear.

This hi-vibration blade could easily slice any ordinary material apart. If she was to use it on the falling falling objects above the girl's head, she would be able to form some cover, and there would be a chance for them to escape.

—No matter what the mean was, they could buy some time.

Having understood her intent, Vermouth aimed his Coil Spear at the girl.

The chosen bullet type was one that could even pierce through sturdy steel.

While he launched a screen of fire, Amaretto would fire the most potent grenade at the wall to the side as according to the plan.

—If they could create a hole, they probably would be able to escape from this place.

This was supposed to happen.

After loading the grenade, Amaretto's upper body vanished without a trace, not even leaving any dust behind.

"…!?"

"What the—"

The black solid gear cube was floating in the air, right beside the girl.

It again spun, letting out a loading sound.

This time, Strega was crushed to scraps along with the noise in the air.

(—Wh-what's going on here—!?)

His sanity was screaming.

Both Amaretto and Strega had the latest technology of combat prosthetic embedded.

Like the use of the Coil Spear, leaving dead bodies behind—was supposedly a forbidden act itself.

But before such worries became necessary, they vanished without leaving any traces behind.

Even if the opponent was a heavily-armed automata, there was no way they should be so overwhelmed to the point of being unable to fight back.

The fact laid in front of them—unable to be changed.

And the ironic thing was that everything was explained here.

The secrecy of this facility, and the importance of the information here.

Compared to these, the PMC-like defenses seemed overly weak.

And with this monster here—there was no reason to doubt.

What is this place? The answer was simple.

—The 'Hell Cauldron'.

(There's no doubt about it.)

It had stealth functions that negated his senses.

It had overwhelming firepower that suppressed them stupidly.

It was a girl model automata that should not exist.

That enemy, the god of death, standing in front of them—

"The Initial-Y series…!!?"

The enemy did not respond.

The girl stared at Vermouth with a stoic, impassive stare, not getting into any position.

—I'll get killed.

"—Ugh!"

Vermouth believed in the instinctive reaction within his head, and got down.

An unknown impact flew by from above, erasing everything.

Due to the invisible attack, his left arm, unable to dodge in the nick of time, was taken away.

Vermouth ignored the damage report ringing in him like a siren, recalibrate the balance caused by the loss of mass on both sides, and leapt from the ground.

He then swung the Coil Spear, changing its shot type from a grenade launcher.

And then, he fired,

An anchor suddenly went flying; at that instance, the crisp sounds of the spinning, high velocity gears rang.

Due to the massive shockwave, the wall broke apart in the form of dust.

Vermouth leapt through the hole, right around the same time the girl's second impact erased the space he occupied.

●

—Think.

Vermouth continued to run for his life, barely managing to dodge the attacks from the approaching death god.

He thought he was going to continuing losing parts of his body.

Up till this point, Vermouth was only able to live thanks to his instincts.

He abandoned the information his sensors had told him, and completely ignored any strategic theory.

He instinctively felt the moments he should dodge, and the moments he should run away.

No matter how he did so, he managed to keep his own life during these 5 brief minutes.

This could be considered a miracle.

But…it was the end of the line

In the end, Vermouth flew into an alley with no way to escape. On top of that, he lost the area below his right knee the moment he leapt away to escape from the attacks.

He could no longer rely on his instincts to escape.

He also dropped his Coil Spear, and the only armament left was a grenade that would not cause any damage to the enemy even if it was a direct hit.

He was extremely calm, unlike the machinery in him that was practically aflame.

He calmly deduced this.

That till this point—his death was unavoidable.

For that, it did not matter to him.

He should have lost his life and human heart 20 years ago.

That he merely lost it on this day again.

What was supposed to be an instantaneous death ended up with him being all weary.

—The problem however was,

“It’s frustrating that I have to die…just like this no matter I think about it—shit!”

Footsteps could be heard .

Amidst the damage reports echoing in his mind, he could hear the sound of death slowly approaching.

It was the breath of the death god who wrecked his two comrades like a joke.

“—Haa.”

Using his hand that was lacking a finger, Vermouth took out a cigarette and lit it.

—This is the kind of job they do.

Neither Amaretto nor Strega were considered friends to him.

If he had to be honest, he did not know their real names, their favorite colors, their favorite choice of music, their families, friends, whether they were attached, or anything else. He never head of their pasts, and he really did not have any interest in that either.

For they were simply no different from him, trash-like people.

Vermouth had neither reason nor friendship to mourn over their deaths,

—However,

They all wanted to do something.

Having known this now, Vermouth realized the ‘passion’ he had forgotten for a long time.

It was not a sense of justice.

It was not a cheap bond of humanism, nor was it a professional conscience of a professional agent.

“…If I can’t even fight back once against that monster.”

It was merely a matter of ‘feelings’ that was part of his nature—

“—That’s disgusting! Damn it!”

It was the little pride the man called Vermouth had.

“Think…!”

He muttered as he exhaled some smoke.

There was no point in fighting against that thing at all; he had neither the technology nor combat abiity.

To him, all he could do was to inflict pain through any method possible. For that, that would mean—using any possible mean to transfer this information he had outside.

The problem was the method.

He had no hopes of surviving. He did not care about revealing his identity.

No matter what he had to let go of.

No matter what he had to eliminate.

As long as he transferred what happened in this place out, it was enough for him.

“I don’t care about anything else now! That’s why!”

Think.

How do I make contact from here to the outside?

This industrial zone was completely isolated from the outside. He had been circling around, but found nary a comms room. He could not contact the outside.

What he could do…was to use the original electronic installation imbued in this body and send a mail to a certain place.

"_"

But what…would be the significance of that?

Which ridiculous psycho would realize the meaning behind an anonymous mail.

Even Vermouth's own boss would…no, wait.

"……Ku, kuhahaha!"

Vermouth laughed at the thing he thought of.

…There certainly was such an existence.

Someone who would show interest in such an meaningless mail, someone whose actions were unpredictable, the one person he knew of with the most foolish mind in the world.

He endured his laugh as much as possible, adjusting his telecommunication frequency

The address was—

"Only the weirdos can deal with the weirdos."

—If it was her.

That Princess who was willing to fight the evils of the world…!

The footsteps stopped.

The unavoidable death was standing right in front of his eyes.

However, Vermouth had an inexplicable sense of solace in his heart.

No problems here. I already did what I can do. I'll just leave the rest.

Because our deaths are—

"—Humph."

He suddenly noticed the thoughts that surfaced within him.

It was not the thing Vermouth had been seeking for a long time, and neither was it some sort of thought.

It was an immature wish that he set aside unknowingly.

"This isn't logical, right…"

He sneered at himself for noticing how childish he was at this point.

With a wry smile, he took a deep breath of smoke.

Having made contact with the malice of many, he had no thoughts about it.

He always thought the world and everything belonging to it were shitty.

However—of course, he could understand at this point.

In this world—there was really some damning things that could not be forgiven even after dying.

It was not because of some troublesome philosophy, and neither was it some youthful ideals or sense of justice.

It was simply the burning passion surging deep within his heart.

Just an invisible thing.

A raging spirit.

And so, if there was a way to deal with that thing.

…Where are the idiots who would do something about this?

We revealed this disgusting conspiracy with our lives as exchange.

If anything and everything can be destroyed here—!

He inhaled a large amount of smoke, and scented upon a smell he should not be sensing.

…Ah, Vermouth smirked.

"It's good now—haha…serves you right, you bastards!"

Before he exhaled the smoke he took in, Vermouth's body vanished along with the space.

●

…I feel so sleepy.

The girl thought while he mind was still hazy.

At this point, she vaguely understood that she was in a dreamy state. It seemed she had forgotten about something important, but she could not think about it clearly. It seemed the floor below her feet could was wobbly, and she was lazy to open her eyes.

"Hm…he sent a mail through the telecommunication installation, huh?"

An unknown human male voice could be heard.

That voice came from beyond the mist, but it was vague as to whether it came from there in the first place.

"I don't think they'll send some really important stuff there…but whose rats are those?"

"She erased them complete, so I don't think we can pint their identities down."

"Guess this is the disadvantage of dealing with things too well…looking at the infiltration methods and level of professionalism in wanting to send the information just as he died, I guess we can guess the identity."

"The Odemas? The Breguets? Who do they belong to…?"

"Can you track down that mail just now?"

"We're doing so, but I don't think he's sending it to his master—"

…Boring.

The girl felt despondent after hearing the uninteresting talk the men had.

She hated things she could not understand. She did not like cold, terrifying things either.

—Destroy, devastate, crush, blend, finish?

What kind of enjoyment is there to be had doing such things? The girl could not understand at all.

Perhaps, the girl thought.

These humans are just idiots who have no common sense. There's so many interesting things to do out there, but their conversations are really boring, hard to understand, and they're doing the same thing over and over again.

—Singing, dancing, playing, laughing, tidying.

There're so many more interesting things to do than that, why aren't they doing so? The girl could not understand. It seemed to be a failed riddle, for there was no answer to be seen.

No matter when, no matter who it was—she would be allowed to do anything she wanted.

"—AnchoR."

The man called her name.

He lifted the face of the girl, AnchoR, and said with a beam.

"Good work. That was some amazing battle result."

…Battle result?

AnchoR tilted her head. In fact, she did not bat an eyelid as she merely looked up at the man's face.

Is this person just a stupid man after all?

He only thinks of cleaning up as some sort of battle result; there is no rhythm, nothing to latch onto. It doesn't look like he has any talent for writing songs.

—Is it because of this that it's so boring?

—Or is it that it's so boring because of this?

"I'll handle the rest here; head for for maintenance first."

AnchoR could not answer the vortex of questions that surfaced, and nodded wordlessly.

—It's fine either way.

This is the ‘eternal’, ‘indestructible’, ‘strongest’ automata.

The 4th unit of the Initial Y-series—the ‘Trishula’ AnchoR.

The girl turned and walked away, her consciousness again falling into a light sleep.

Chapter 1 - 14:30 – Goober

—Human life has no value.

But it is not meaningless.

There are those who had differing opinions, those with refuting opinions—however, nobody, even God, could deny the above fact.

For though others was to gauge the value, the recognition of the meaning in that belongs to the individual.

Thus, humans continued to live on, seeking the reason as to why they live

No matter how much or how little, it is all within life.

As for what true ‘blissfulness’ was, anybody would surely know.

—Despite being impoverished, his parents dead, his house sank, his face and mind lacking.

He understood very well the purpose of his birth, recognized this, and continued while devoting himself to that cause. That was surely the utmost blissfulness a human could get.

Naoto Miura firmly believed in that.

For he discovered that meaning.

Because of that,

“So teach, you definitely know what a human has to do when he’s looking for what he has to do, right?”

Naoto Miura said while clenching his fists tightly.

He stood firmly on his two legs, and adamantly puffed his chest of a body already smaller than an ordinary human.

—Yes. He knew.

The significance of his birth, the reason why he seek death, why he had to risk his life when it was an important situation, he already had that most important thing within him!

“As a human…no, as a man!”

Naoto’s gray eyes are burning with blames.

“When one hear that there’s a super cute Automata girl, no matter whether it’s the North Pole! Mardego! No, even the far end of the galaxy! He’ll normally go there straight away at full speed no matter what, for it’s a man’s duty—no! A destiny to do that!!!”

He raised his fists as he yelled out loud.

An aging man, the homeroom teacher, was standing in front of Naoto, looking somewhat overwhelmed, and nodded slightly as he looked down.

“—And then?”

“Yes! In—other—words! This lowly me has to report to you and apologize that I’ll be taking leave since I have to go attack Tokyo for a personal reason!”

—Naoto Miura was beaming as he submitted his leave request form.

In contrast, the homeroom teacher could only force a smile, like he was facing a mirror.

“You’re that kind of person, aren’t you, Naoto Miura?”

And he handed out a different piece of paper in front of Naoto.

It was a white piece of paper with a ‘0’ written with a red pen.

…That was the answer script.

“You are being a complete fool, no?”

“—”

While the smile remained frozen on Naoto’s face, the homeroom teacher continued with clarity,

“Be obedient now and take your remedials. If you got another failing mark again, you won’t be submitting a leave request form, but writing an expulsion form. I can write a recommendation letter for a good neurosurgeon too, no?

And thus,

The magnificent determination and realization of Naoto Miura crumbled without a choice.

●

Yes, there was no other choice for Naoto Miura.

There was an anomaly in Tokyo.

And over there was RyuZU’s little sister—another member of the Initial-Y series.

The moment he learned of that intelligence, Naoto was determined to travel to Tokyo without showing any hesitation—

And the girl (RyuZU) who meant everything to his life stared at him with moist eyes.

“Master Naoto, if you are to continue on falling in society like this, there may not be an absolute change, but the relative opinion of society would mark you as one below even an amoeba. As my master, please do not bring me much grief beyond what I can handle today.”

The smile was devoid of any malice.

She was simply worried about Naoto.

It was because of her spiteful filter that she became so merciless, only ending up telling him off.

In the face of the goodwill this Automata showed—he was left with no choice.

…To begin with.

“—And so, all wars in human history was declared ended 1,000 years ago.”

The history teacher’s flat voice echoed in this classroom filled with few people.

“Humans are not that foolish to let bullets fly around on this Earth that was transformed b the state of the art mechanization, or in other words, the extremely intricate Clockwork. According to the regulations of the International treaty, each country can only station necessary military forces for protecting the city. The ancient technology that would obvious threaten the survival of humanity, especially the ‘electromagnetism’ technology, seems to have been forbidden from being used openly—”

The teacher continued to write the points on the blackboard from time to time as he continued teaching, seemingly just reciting the textbook.

Bored, Naoto placed his hands on his chin as he asked the silver haired girl beside him.

“Hey RyuZU. What’s this electro technology?”

“It is a remnant from the distant past, where the great humans used their immature minds and theories to gauge the unknown.”

The girl who was asked, RyuZU, gave a brighter smile as she answered Naoto.

Her voice was as delightful as a music box, echoing in the classroom,

“It can be said to be a futile layering of effort even apes would mock. Right now, it is nothing more than an antique of no value. With that brain of yours, Master Naoto, even if you do know about this, it is merely a inefficient use of your memory capacity.”

“Ah, in other words, it’s fine even if I don’t know anything about it?”

“To an elite like you, Master Naoto, there is no need for you to listen to such things during a holiday.”

RyuZU spoke with a bashful flower-like smile.

But on the other hand, those golden eyes were giving off a venomous poison, seemingly wanting to kill its prey.

The teacher endured RyuZU’s spiteful glare as he continued with a trembling voice,

“T-this is common knowledge required for elementary education! E-Electromagnetism will affect the movements of the gears, All such research and use is forbidden so as to allow the ‘Plant Governor’ to protect the landscape from the sun’s rays, except for the magnetic fields located at the North and South Poles…”

“”Do you hear this, Master Naoto? This is simply memorizing and regurgitating the textbook, and I did mention this to you before.”

RyuZU continued on without skipping a beat, and the teacher shiever.

Naoto tilted his head with intrigue,

"Why's that so?"

"Well, if the use and research is forbidden, we are not able to truly learn about it, no? To put it, since what we just heard all this while was simply a simple recitation of all the contents of the textbook, is modern lessons simply a recital of textbooks? In that case, it will be more efficient to read the textbook at our our homes, and the lesson itself is simply futile, of no benefit."

"Well…even if you say so, without lessons, I can't begin with self-study."

Naoto muttered as he let out a sigh.

However, RyuZU folded her arms, and stately coldly, Yes, if we are to start—

"As I say, who exactly is it who did the ignoramus act of making made 'my Master Naoto' come here during the holidays? Did your abdomen rise like an express shipping styled of the organ filled with the technology to read textbooks?"

The teacher's face was twitching in response to RyuZU's verbal jab.

And in response, Naoto could only sigh painfully, explaining.

"That's not it, RyuZU. I'm taking remedials because I failed my exams."

Is that so? RyuZu looked somewhat bemused, and nodded greatly just like a human, when one would forget she was an automata, maintaining her smile,

"Then, who exactly in the person who deemed 'my Master Naoto' to have failed, who is actually an imbecile claiming to be all-knowing? Is it that person who is so deplorable both in terms of the inside and the appearance?"

She glanced aside at the quivering teacher, and Naoto shook his head

"No RyuZU. I've failed because I got a failing grade during the end-of-terms exams."

“I see. Then, who exactly is the primate who caused ‘my Master Naoto’ to set such blasphemous questions that made ‘my Master Naoto’ to fail? Is it actually the primate who is quivering strangely at the podium, enjoying himself together with the neighbor’s wife, or to be specific, connected only at the lower body?”

“Wh—ho-ho-how do you know—th-that’s not it!1”

The teacher, blatantly panicking, broke into tears, yelling,

“I-I’m just doing this for my duty! I still have to attend lessons just for Naoto here! Can you please consider that I am working hard here, RyuZU?”

And while the teacher continued to explain, screaming in agony, RyuZu merely smiled,

“Yes, it is useless to spend time explaining to fleas, and for the sake of letting Master Naoto leave leave the classroom as soon as possible, I am honestly presenting my ‘wish’ with such humility and politeness…I suppose I am unable to convey this without speaking the language of fleas.”

—Well, that was basically how it went.

RyuZU could not accept that Naoto was having remedials because hefailed.

And so, on the first two days of the remedials.

RyZU was hounding and wrecking the teacher’s mental state with her torrent of brutal words.

She herself did not realize that this was a function of the so-called swear filter that was installed within her.

And thus, she was not lying. She actually intended to ‘honestly presenting my ‘wish’ with such humility and politeness’.

But only Naoto could comprehend this, as he was the only one able to hear the vibrations inside her.

And so, RyuZU's artistic verbal bombardments continued to lash out during the remedial period.

And the teacher, who continued to endure till this point, had his mental state driven to the brink of collapse.

Or rather, at the limit. Just when the teacher's mind was about to collapse,

Bell chimes…

The chime rang,

"I-I can't, can't take this anymore! Naoto Miura! It's a Sunday tomorrow, so the next remedial's on Monday. I'm going to let another subject teacher handle this from next Monday onwards! I'm going to request for sp-sp-sp-special compensation from the principal and psychological therapppppyyy!!!"

Naoto watched the teacher scream and sprint out of the classroom, and so he lifted his head, looking up at the ceiling.

And RyuZU, unaware of her own venomous tongue, could only tilt her head in surprise,

"Has he realized his own incompetence and decided to head to the hospital? I do like those who, despite their intelligence below that of an amoeba, is able to understand themselves well, be humble, and reflect upon their actions."

"…Hm, well, I think I better apologize to prevent this unreasonable rage from being targetted at me."

He had to do something by Monday before the number of victims increased.

Naoto hugged his head as he left school along with RyuZU.

●

Marie Bell Breguet had no experience of attending school.

—Well, that would be putting it lightly. She had already went past numerous borders, graduating from many universities, and was always the valedictorian at these top-notch universities.

But even so, to Marie.

This place, the Tadasunomori High School in Kyoto, was the first time she ‘went to school’.

The Breguet Corporation was one of the 5 major enterprises ruling the world’s economy, and as the darling of the chairman, others provided the best environment for education that allowed her to fulfill her potential ever since she was born.

She was brimming with talent, loaded with finances, had the best facilities.

To her, was there ever a need for her to ‘attend school’?

Even the best institutions in the world could not compare to the Breguets’ education environment. Despite this, Marie attended the universities, neither for studies nor research.

She was to attend them as the princess of a refined family, to be sociable, to build human relationships.

All for the sake of ‘proving’.

—The talent and ability the young girl Marie Bell Breguet possessed was clear for all to see.

And because of this, to her, she was unable to call this as ‘attending school’. She was simply there just to partake in the necessary examinations to attain her certifications.

Her mentality did not change much when she entered in the qualification column of the entry sheet ‘looking for a job’.

On one hand, here was the Tadasunomori High School.

Leaving aside the teaching environment, the level of the teachers and students was basically the same as a free and easy time for her, compared to the universities she graduated from. Of course, to one who was once called a Meister and worked on the frontlines, there was no reason that necessitated her to study at this place, even if it was for social learning.

—However.

There was something Marie actually first learned of at this place.

And that was—

“So failing marks do really exist.”

She chewed on the green tea dango as she let out this mutter, and Halter gave her an indescribable expression as he looked down.

She had dazzling blond hair and bouncy white skin, a beauty of a girl akin to a bisque doll, but one could tell from the emerald eyes beneath her face that there was a powerful, determined will flickering within her.

She was simply dressed in a normal sailor uniform and an orange parka…but there was no hiding the aptitude of a king from this girl, one brimming with passion.

And Halter spoke with a tone of disbelief,

“…Allow me to ask. You never heard of this before?”

“I know that it exists, but I always thought it was just something in name. I never thought such a thing would actually exist.”

“Since there are exams, there are marks, so there are people who end up failing.”

“That’s what I mean.”

“Hm?”

While Halter expressed his skepticism, Marie added on,

“If you’re at school, that means you have to attend classes, right? And those stuff you learn will appear in the exams, right? The end-of-terms is an assessment meant to make sure whether the students understand the contents of the lessons, right?”

“Yes, that’s the case.”

Well, isn’t that such an obvious fact? Halter nodded.

And because of this, Marie could not comprehend.

“Then, why do they fail?”

“Even if you’re saying…”

“So they can’t answer that content they learn even though they already attended the lessons? Isn’t this a logical paradox here!? —This really is an interesting, puzzling phenomenon…”

“Milady…you’re now the enemy of all the students in the world.”

Halter sighed as he slumped his shoulders hard.

His massive bear-like body changed its posture slightly, and the red cushion bench he was sitting on let out a creaking sound.

The duo was seated side by side, seated in a little teahouse located in the sightseeing area of the country of Japan, Grid Kyoto. They were under a

red paper umbrella of the wooden shop built specifically in the bamboo thicket, facing the tourists.

Marie too was drawn in by this shop, and within this shop, there were other foreigners to be seen, not just her and Halter.

Grid Kyoto was one of the few sightseeing cities in Japan.

1000 years ago, when the Earth was reconstructed through gears, the heritage relics left all over the world were preserved as close to their original state as possible.

And amongst them, Kyoto was renowned for having many of these preserved heritages.

Marie, chewing on her second stick of dangoes, asked skeptically,

“It’s one acceptable thing if the student can’t answer the question because there’s something he didn’t learn about tested in the exam, but if it’s a question regarding something tested in class……..why can’t he answer it? I can’t understand at all!”

“I don’t understand that either, Milady.”

Halter let out a deep sigh. To him, who went through many ordeals like an ordinary human, the simple skepticism showed by this genius girl was really agonizing to him.

Having paid the bill, the duo strolled in the bamboo thicker behind the teahouse.

The white stone pedestrian pathway was built upon the bare ground. The sunlight was demure due to the bamboo sheltering, and the air felt refreshing. The noisy breeze blew, causing a fresh stench to be whiffed at.

It was not artificial, but natural; not an imitation, but the real thing, 'nature' itself.
This was the highly intricate Clockwork Planet.

As the construct was overly complicated, this structure had been maintained for 1000 years, and had become a hollow star extremely difficult to continue lasting. One had to wonder how much cost and technology was required to maintain Mother Nature above those gears.

"…The Japanese are seriously picky about such things. Is there really a need to be so thorough about this?"

The scenery from 1000 years ago was replicated perfectly in front of them, and one could sense the fanaticism the craftsmen had, excluding the clock technicians. Even Marie was amazed as she thought about it.

"Kyoto is said to be one of the rare few tourist destinations left on this world, right? It's been 1000 years, and if we're including the thousands of years before the death of this planet, they're still able to preserve 'this' after all the climate changes and disasters, and that's why the visitors love this place."

"Well, it's true, and I really do earnestly respect those who put in such effort—"

Marie showed a bitter smile as she continued,

"Thinking about how the 'government' is willing to purge so readily, I wonder what the people's feelings amount to."

"Humans all have things they're not going to compromise, Milady. To craftsmen, this is an insistence they will never back down on."

Halter fiddled with the falling leaves with one hand as he let out a poignant grimace.

After passing through the old-fashioned pedestrian pathway, the internal scenery of the massive monastery was revealed to them.

That was the five-storied pagoda, one of the iconic places of Kyoto.

"…Hm, I guess it's really as impressive as they say. That guy's 'advice' is only useful here."

Marie grimaced as she opened the hand drawn tourist map.

At a corner of that paper was a signature of crude handwriting, 'Naoto Miura'.

When she asked him what she and Halter should do while he was having his remedials, his reply was,

"Well, go on a tourist trip like a student staying overseas.'

And he handed over this drawn piece of paper as he said this.

This piece of paper listed the 12 most iconic tourist attractions in Kyoto.

—But that's just how they seem on the surface They're all 'Clock Towers'.

They were not items simply used to tell time. These are the 12 pillars supporting the environment pillars of this Grid Kyoto—the 'clock tower'.

And this five-storied pagoda was once of them.

A 20m tall wooden Buddhist tower.

As an important facility related to the functions of the city, its existence was actually as classified information for the 'military'.In this sense, the appearance was simply that of a monastery building befitting of a tourist attraction, but the inside was completely modified into a clockwork installlation.

Marie stared at this perfect disguise that would have fooled anyone if not for Naoto mentioning it, and pulled out a small instrument from her slingbag as she wandered around the building without anyone noticing.

This was an observation instrument clockwork technicians use.

The vibration wave measurement device, an instrument that does precise observations withut breaking apart the machines moving the gears.

Marie then switched it on, and stared at the device that displayed the numbers with the sound effect of a typewriter.

A little while later, she gave an emotionless look, and clicked her tongue,

“I guess this toy alone isn’t going to help me understand this.”

“You’re calling an instrument you stole from the ‘Guild’ as a toy…”

“I know it’s the latest technology that’s yet to be released on the market. It’s easy to carry around, but there’s a limitation to that. It’s not an item that can be used precisely at this distance.”

—3 weeks ago.

Marie was in this Kyoto, and foiled the plan to purge this city.

The ‘Government’, ‘Military’, and ‘Meister Guild’ plotted a major incident that was unprecedented, wanting to purge a city and kill the 20 million citizens living in it. Marie worked together with Naoto to prevent this massive tragedy, and for the time being, took control of the ‘absolute gear’ that formed Kyoto.

And so, Marie visited this clock tower to investigate on the weather interference, which caused a series of phenomena, including the forceful override of gravity.

However, as she had lost her identity as a Meister, Marie was simply walking around as a civilian. She had no privilege to enter the clock tower, let alone the ‘core tower’ the ‘military managed’.

And thus, she had no choice by to carry out investigations on the outside using her portable devices.

"—Guess there's no point."

And as Marie showed an uneasy look, Halter immediately chimed in,

"Milady, please don't do illegal acts while having the attitude of buying snacks, okay? You're just an ordinary civilian now."

And upon those words, Marie pouted,

"I know that. I don't want to continue causing commotions because of such things, okay?"

—That's what you're hoping for, right?

Halter knew very well of the girl's 'history', but he decided to remain silent.

And Marie, not comprehending Halter's heart, continued,

"I'm thinking about that idiot~~!"

There was a strange tone in the way she emphasized the word 'idiot'.

And then, she seemed to realize something as she steadied her breath, folded her arms, and closed her eyes.

"……"

And pricked her ears.

—Once.

She recalled the anomaly she saw Naoto Miura display, the person who was nonchalantly attending remedials.

It felt like a miracle witnessed in the midst of a gut-churning conspiracy drama.

He, Naoto Miura mentioned to observe all the functioning gears, amount to at least ten quadrillion, at that place and time using his own ears.

Perhaps it could be easy to explain it as ‘abnormal hearing’, to dismiss it as a ‘talent’.

But that was not the case…and so, Marie, tried to understand this herself.

No matter how many potent observation facilities were activated, none could match that ‘talent’. There simply was no comparison there.

She tried to listen like he died, but she was unable to even imitate, let alone concentrate.

She was only able to hear the rustling breeze, the birds chirping, the buzzing of the crowds, and the dull vibrations from underground. That was all.
—This was to be expected. ‘Sounds’ are ‘vibrations’.

If waves are to interfere with each other, it is obvious the shapes would change.

And furthermore, there were countless sound waves. It was ‘common sense’ that the initial waves were indistinguishable.

There were quadrillions of gears within, with sounds of countless gears overlapping each other, and yet he ‘understood it all’, so the question was—how exactly did he hear them?

The miraculous talent that could never be replicated in anyone’s perspective was terrifying, to say the least.

And yet, because of the ridiculous reason that he flunked his high school examinations—

"…Ah, goodness! How ridiculous is it that the guy has such an extraordinary talent, and yet he's really a good-for-nothing who can't even understand the basic education of high school sufficiently! Am I taken for a fool here?"

And as Marie packed her instrument while growling away,

"I suppose he is more adorable than a perfect superhuman. But even so, I guess the balance's not quite there yet."

He has such an irrational 'talent' . What else can you say even if he has illogically bad grades'? Halter mumbled,

"Goodness…we could have been in Tokyo now if things go to plan."

"To me, I hope you're be able to mature a little more now…it's been 3 weeks since that incident. We can't say that the aftershock of it has completely cooled down, right?"

Having solved the Kyoto Inferno, Marie revealed much classified information that resulted in a massive commotion, and it seemed it would be hard for this to end within one or two months. On the surface, it seemed the commotion had gradually cooled off, but the matter was yet to be concluded to a point of anyone forgetting about it.

And as Halter sighed while saying this, Marie pouted her lips unhappily,

"…Hm, let's talk about Tokyo then. There's still no contact from there after that?"

Marie was originally being very impatient, on teeters because ever since they got word of the events in Tokyo, they were embroiled in some unimportant matters.

And in response to Marie's question, Halter answered,

"'Thank goodness' there isn't. If I have to say which anomaly it is—is it the important Initial-Y series being moved, and the 'military' having

some strange movements for some reason? How about you calm down and think about it, Milady?"

"That Initial-Y series is called AnchoR, isn't it? Confirming that alone is enough reason for us to head to Tokyo. Since we saw 'that thing' about RyuZU, you know?"

"…I guess."

Halter shrugged his shoulders slightly as he rubbed his bald head.

Naoto's abnormal hearing was not the only miracle…no, illogical matter they witnessed 3 weeks ago

—The Initial-Y series.

The legendary Automatas left behind by 'Y', who designed this Clockwork Planet.

The first entry of this series was RyuZU, and she thoroughly rendered all of Marie's logic haphazard.

When the imaginary time ran, in the eternally still world, she destroyed a massive military Automata force using her 'Mute Scream'. Such a function was a threat no matter what.

And yet RyuZU, being like this, declared herself to be the weakest.

And it was a perilous thing to let the other machines fall into anyone's hands.

But in this situation, it was an indisputable truth, that it was meaningless for them to enter Tokyo without any added information.

"It's a rare thing to come to Japan to study. How about you just laze around and live a life as a commoner."

"2 weeks of this is more than enough."

Marie showed a heinous glare as she pouted her lips.

“The foreign student Maribel Halter is just a disguise, an assumed identity to carry out secret terrorist acts to save the world. Do you understand this, ‘big brother’?”

Marie deliberately greeted the massive Cyborg man beside her, deliberately emphasizing this.

This was the initial identity set when Marie Bell Breguet attended a Japanese school along Halter.

“I still can’t get used to…this character setting.”

Halter gave a disgusted look as he shivered.

And in response, Marie showed a sadistic smile.

“Hey, is big brother, as in onii-chan better? Or big brother, as in ‘aniki’?”

“Alright, spare me already, Milady. I’m about to puke.”

“Huh? Why’re you still unhappy to have such a cute little girl saying such things to you? You don’t like our established relationship as siblings? Then…I see.”

Marie brought her lips to Halter’s ears,

“—’Papa ♪ ‘ shall I call you that?”

"!!!!"

The moment he heard those words, Halter rolled back in surprise, taken aback.

Marie looked down, grinning at the massive frame of the bodyguard cum secretary unable to handle the agony of irresistible itch and shivers, and muttered,

"Well, never mind. It's a waste of time to be here. Let's just hurry up and go back now."

"—Ahh, renting out the suite room of a top-class hotel as a 'home' is not an example of the commoner's life I just said."

As Halter muttered this while standing up, Marie frowned and answered,

"We got no other choice, right? It's important for a clock technician to have a workshop and equipment. We need space to put the important equipment, the bare minimum, and the only place with perfect security for that is—"

"—Milady, wait."

Suddenly.

Halter raised his hand to stop the grumbling Marie,

"—? What?"

And as Marie asked in surprise, Halter frowned as he stroked his chin,

"…Ah, Milady. I just received a strange 'message'."

"Is it related to the aftermath of that Tokyo incident?"

"No, this looks like it's received from the hotel's terminal installation. Ah…no, I don't know whether it's okay to say this."

And as Halter looked perturbed, Marie said,

"…? Alright now, just tell me what it's all about."

And in response, Halter adamantly let out a sigh,

"Well…if you wish, Milady. Remember though that I just told you that I can't say this, okay?"

And after affirming and stating this, Halter let out a cough.

Then, he slowly opened his mouth,

And read what he had just heard.

●

At the same time,

"…Hm?"

Naoto, being in the manga cafe, lifted his head to look.

And seated beside him was RyuZU, clinging to him like a couple, opening the textbooks as she grumbled with her eyes half-closed.

"—Master Naoto, if my personal tuition is too uninteresting for you, would you please tell me that at least?"

"Eh? Ah, no, that's definitely not it—"

RyuZU's voice was as delightful to listen to as always, filled with elegance, without any chaos.

But Naoto could clearly distinguish any slight change in it.

It was merely a little contorted, merely a little shrill; she was hurt

And to prevent this fact from developing awkwardly any further, Naoto frantically shook his head.

And while Naoto was like that, RyuZU continued calmly.

"All I would ask for is, please explain to me in a way why you are more willing to stare at the stain on the ceiling instead of me? For a being like you, I do comprehend that you do have a very noble reason for this—you are wishing to accomplish the great work of communicating with aliens, no?"

—The peerless beautiful girl was expressing jealousy at the stain on the ceiling.

RyuZU's tranquil, beautifully clear voice echoed in the manga cafe, causing many a click of the tongue echoing I Naoto's ears.

He could already heard the mutters, 'ahh, that shitty idiot couple again'.

….Yes, this was the couple suite of the now personalized manga cafe.

And this was the 'home' of Naoto and RyuZU.

In other words, they were refugees of the manga cafe.

But even so, this was not because they were lingering on the line of poverty.

If they were to use the money RyuZU got through 'investments', they would definitely be able to buy a new house, even if it is a mansion, and still have lots of money leftover. However, Naoto did not have a strong heart capable of accepting this fact.

And most importantly,

"Or is it…that your wish to 'stick close together with RyuZU'…is all a lie.

DON.

An astounded, unified slamming on the wall could be heard from the shop booths.

Even without Naoto's abnormal hearing, anyone could have heard that sound. It was a loud thud on the wall that echoed throughout the manga cafe , clearly expressing to anyone her intentions.

While enduring this unbearable, perilous atmosphere, Naoto stared at RyuZU's face.

It was a beautiful, dignified face as usual.

The radiant, pure silver hair and the silky white skin were coupled with the peach colored lips and the rosy cheeks. The golden eyes, dazzling like a crown, could be said to be gemstones of life, a beautiful face one could say to be otherworldly.

—But at this point, it was wavering uneasily.

Naoto intended to divert the topic, and added on to RyuZU's sarcasm.

"A-ahaha, e-erm, eh, hm, are there really aliens out there?"

"…Please pardon me. I have stated sarcasm I am not used to saying, so please allow me to say this again. There are moments when humans are too outstanding. Your mind, Master Naoto, exceeds that of the human limit, surpassing even my comprehension, even crossing a 'line', and breaking into oblivion, is it not?"

And Naoto, upon seeing that RyuZU's eyes were becoming frosty, hurriedly shook his head, answering,

"Th-that's not it! It's because I heard a sound, it's like 'this kind of feeling if there's an alien around'."

"…Master Naoto, it is true that you are currently the most outstanding human on this planet. If you are able to hear a sound that does not exist, normally speaking (beep)—"

"Please pardon us!"

BAM!!

The manga cafe door was kicked away hard, overriding RyuZU's voice.

An agitated voice could be heard approaching little by little, with the momentum of a storm that could ostensibly blow this entire building apart.

"Naoto Miura! To Naoto Miura who's a pervert in all ways, answer me within a second!"

And upon hearing that voice, Naoto hurriedly got up from the couple suite.

On the narrow corridor between the booths, he spotted the showy blond girl shouting.

"Yes! But 'please pardon us' here is supposed to be a polite form of speech! Don't use it as a 'declaration', you French!"

But the blond girl did not care about those words.

The girl, Marie, glared at Naoto while the latter poked his head out, and leaped at him.

“So you’re here, you pervert! Now’s the time for you to use that talent that’s far beyond that of a pervert now! Alright, tell me now, you pervert!!”

“W-wait, I’m suffering!!”

And Marie was slamming at Naoto’s chest on the partition separating the rooms.

“E-erm, dear customer? Please be quiet here—no, it’s nothing. Please continue to enjoy yourself.”

The brave shop attendant who made the snap decision of reminding Marie escaped like a hare without hesitation after a glance from the latter.

And in contrast, the one standing still there was RyuZU.

She looked down at Marie, who’s on a destructive rampage, and jabbed sharply,

“Oh, Master Marie? A scholar who has been away 3 days has be to looked at with new eyes, but you are still as immature as ever today, and also extremely energetic…I do find this a massive pity.”

“Sorry for not being a scholar and being so energetic!”

“No, actually, no matter whether it is in terms of mentality—or in terms of body size, I do determine that it is difficult to distinguish your gender.”

I”m really going to break you up today!!”

And in face of Marie’s heinous glare, RyuZU shot back a death glare.

“—But even if you do say so, if you are going to continue clinging onto Master Naoto and not let go of your hands, Master Marie, it may seem

that I will have to sever your hands from your body, and the one to be dissected shall be—"

And as she said this, her skirt was swaying unsteadily—

"Alright now, calm down, you brats."

And the moment Halter said this, he sent his fist landing on the top of Marie's head.

"~~~~!"

You had enough? Marie was left cuddling her head after the cyborg Halter's punch landed on her, groaning in pain.

With tears appearing at the side of her eyes, she stared at the massive body behind you.

"You…"

"Anything you want to say?"

"…Why did you beat me…?"

"The issue this time is clearly between this crazy Marie and that overly sensitive Missy RyuZU down there. That Missy hasn't done anything to me, and I don't want her dismantling anything in her counterattack."

He said, and looked over at RyuZU,

"I do earnestly apologize for causing you much trouble—and for not doing anything to me."

He said as he lowered his head earnestly. With a smile, RyuZU let out a little sigh,

"…You always do some surprising things there, Mr Scrap Metal. I do find it a pity that if I am to exclude Master Naoto here, you will be the wisest amongst all ."

"That's an honor. Now then, you alright, Naoto?"

Now released from Marie's hands, Naoto was panting for breath as he said,

"Ah…yeah, I guess I can be called alright? Why did she suddenly do that to me? Mind giving me a acceptable reason?"

"Well, I guess that's the case. Hm…I know this will be somewhat troubling you, but I need you to hear out something…hey, Milady, you cooled down already?"

With Halter prompting her, Marie slowly got to her feet.

Her eyes were still teary, probably due to the pain, and she rubbed the bump on her head, saying,

"…I want you to help me trace the source of a message."

"Trace? You shouldn't be asking me then. You can just check with the relay station instead of me."

As far as Naoto knew, all transmission was done through the cable transmissions processed through the conducting gears, or wireless transmissions through the resonating vibrations through long distance. If they were to check the path, the other end of the line would be the sender.

As for why they were asking him,

"No, it's not a transmission through a relay station. To be honest here, it's a short wave transmission."

And Naoto simply answered Halter with skepticism,

"…And I just learned that it's an 'illegal' thing to do that, isn't it? Such timing."

"Well there, you'll get bald if you worry about the details, alright?"

Ahem. Halter inadvertently grinned as he patted his bald head.

And RyuZU gave him a tender look, muttering quietly,

“Master Naoto, if I may say from experience, it is better to live a steady life by thinking small, no? It may not be very convincing, but I do wish you will listen here.”

Halter nodded, his lips moving slightly,

“—It’s useless if we do abide by the law and end up losing.”

Those sarcastic voices were such that no ordinary person could hear, yet Naoto was able to hear them clearly.

“It’s a ‘special work’ where rules can be damned here. No matter how forbidden it is, since there’s a possibility the ‘enemy’ will be using it, we have to respond in kind. Electromagnetic transmissions aren’t really that useful nowadays. Don’t mind”

…He said.

A mere human ill-fated for fighting scenes, Naoto gave a painful wince,

“…No way, I don’t want to be arrested and put in jail here…”

“On a side note, it’s undoubtedly against the law for a civilian to actually have an automata like RyuZU, far beyond normal capabilities limits.”

“So what about the law here! Anyway, let’s hear what you have to say, Mr Halter!”

Naoto gently swung his palms, and clasped Halter’s firm hands.

—And RyuZU too had nothing much to say. A crime had to be discovered before it is established.

And so, Marie looked around, asking,

“It’s a little sudden—but Naoto, you can hear ‘a strange sound’, right?”

“A strange ‘sound’? I’m able to hear your growling non-stop, Marie.”

“That’s not what I mean! …I’m saying that instead of a voice, are you able to hear a wave of a higher frequency. If I have to say it’s a voice, that’ll be an ‘abnormally high pitched sound’.”

“An ‘abnormally high pitched sound’…?”

Naoto frowned, folded his arms, and pondered deepy.

Halter let out a sigh, muttering,

“I guess this is too much to request of, isn’t it…?”

And RyuZU, seemingly pondering over the same question, nodded as well.

“—So, when you stared at the ceiling, you were communicating with outer space after all, Master Naoto.”

“Ah? That’s an ‘Electro wave’? No wonder it’s a sound I’m not used to hearng.”

“—Huh?”

The moment Naoto answered without hesitation, Halter widened his eyes.

“…Hey, wait, Naoto. This seems like a joke no matter what.”

The wave detector Halter received was an electromagnetic wave of 30 Mega Hertz.

That was an ultrasonic wave beyond 1,500 times that of a normal human’s hearing range. However, he was able to hear the Electromagnetic waves personally, and with headphones that was 100% soundproof—?

—What exactly was this person 'hearing'?

Halter wondered, and inadvertently shuddered.

But Marie beside him nodded away, looking as if she expected all of that.

"This is nothing much compared to identifying all the gears in the Core Tower—anyway, Naoto."

Marie left Halter behind, and continued on,

"Which direction do you hear that sound from? Do you know?"

"Erm, it's right above…no, about 88 degrees, no? —Wait, what are you planning?"

Before Naoto could finish, Marie forced herself into the couple's suite where Naoto and RyuZU were at, and snatched the stationery and a notebook that were laid out on the table.

She then stepped on Naoto's knee, and quietly did her calculations with a pencil.

"…My apologies, Master Marie, but may I ask who gave you the permission to get on Master Naoto like that—"

"Ah, RyuZU's face is looking really nice now! If it's my knee, you can do so anytime—"

"You two are really noisy, stupid couple!"

Marie yelled sharply, and then quickly switched over to a presentation tone as she continued,

"This is a transmission of short wave. Since the 'Planet Governor' at the North and South Poles protect the planet from the sun rays, forming electromagnetic fields, the short waves will then reflect here. Using trigonometry, we can pick up the source of the signal. Since it's a message coming from around above, it's nearby—if considering the time that elapsed and the movement of the gears…"

Seemingly getting the answer, she enthusiastically circled the coordinates she obtained through her rough calculations, saying,

"The place is—Mie. The next gear city. Looking at the relative coordinates, it's the industrial complex. Let's go over now."

"No, I say…"

Naoto, unable to comprehend what he just heard, shook his head.

He still could not understand why this land mine of a blond girl was being so furious.

He turned his sight to a fuming Marie, sitting on his knee, and asked skeptically,

"So, what exactly was in that transmission?"

Upon hearing those words, Marie was taken aback, frozen.

"Th-that's, erm…wah!! What are you doing!?"

While Marie was stammering,

RyuZU poked her sharp scythes out from under her skirt, skilfully positioning them right at Marie's collar, lifted her up, and threw her off the couple's seat.

"—And then?"

RyuZU then asked, showing a gentle expression that would kill even a bug,

"No matter how much of an emergency message it is, it is absolutely unforgivable to do an outrageous thing like standing on Master Naoto for so long. Of course, we are still willing to hear you out no?"

Of course, leaving aside her eyes that were showing skepticism, even her smile, blooming like a flower, was filled with the terror of Absolute Zero.

“Ah, yes, well…”

Halter gave a look at a wordless Marie, and seemingly left with no choice, he spoke up.

He coughed, and sighed,

“—Hey Bitch.”

Marie shuddered, her body frozen.

And Halter glanced aside at Marie while the latter shivered all over again, trying his best not to show any emotion as he spoke with a stoic voice,

“Aren’t you getting all too jumpy over there, you ghost girl? Are you not satisfied because your little hole hasn’t received anything?”

“_”

There was silence.

Marie was clenching her fists tightly, slamming the floor hard.

And Halter ignored that unsightliness as he read the last paragraph,

“Are you waiting for the little big cock to fuck that thing you have? Shake your cute little ass and beg me here, you Nympho. Well, that was the message received.”

“Was that sent to Marie?”

“Maybe? It’s a short wave transmission, so anyone ‘within the region’ can receive it. I just so happened to receive it.”

That’s weird. And Naoto tilted his head as he stared at Marie, now shuddering on the floor.

"Then, why is Marie able to be certain that it was sent to her?"

"Master Naoto…being dense is a privilege for a protagonist, but this really is depressing to say. Humans do feel enraged regarding certain issues, normally because that is a fact. Master Marie, if you are really yearning for it, there is a shop nearby selling such toys—"

"That's not it, enough already!"

Marie leapt to her feet, her face flushed as she yelled,

"Ghost! Girl! This is it! This clearly is pointing for me here, right?"

"Speaking of which, how do you even know of that kind of shop, RyuZU?"

"That is to be expected. It is the duty of a follower to satisfy the desires of Master Naoto, who is so distorted to a point of being unidentifiable. When I am asked it, I can quickly—"

"Listen up already!"

Marie growled, and hugged her head in lethargy.

"Ahh, I can't stand this anymore. I'm going to collapse while talking to you….! Anyway, you guys are coming with me now."

"…Eh, buy those toys?"

"I'll kill you! Of course I'm going to tie the idiot who sent this message and hang him up. Also, I want to get you roped in for practice, you know!?"

"Please leave me out of this highly difficulty sex play…"

Naoto groaned in agony, and RyuZU beside him nodded, saying,

"I do find myself unable to comprehend the meaning of going off together. It is not my wish in the slightest, but Master Naoto has to go for remedials and break out from a state of being frowned upon by

imbeciles, and I do have personal tuition to attend to. In that case, please head there alone."

She answered curtly.

And Halter stepped up in place of the flabbergasted Marie, calmly saying,

"Yo Naoto. It's Sunday tomorrow. No remedials, right?"

"Hm, well, you can say that?"

"Assuming that the coordinates this Milady said is correct, if I remember correctly, located near the Industrial complex is a seawater bathhouse, rare even in Japan."

Shocked!

A seawater bathhouse. This line alone caused Naoto to freeze.

Halter raised his lips the moment he saw that response, and continued to shamelessly prod away.

"And especially in this season, February's the perfect season for seawater bathing. A season that really shows swimsuits—"

"Ah, 'cuse me, I'll like to check out. Please give me the bill."

This voice came from behind Halter, at the counter, and even Halter was left dumbfounded as he turned his head back.

"Well, we can just come back before Monday. Alright, let's go everyone. No time to waste."

"As expected of you, Master Naoto. The energy of your distorted desires, originally limited to Clockwork Automatas, can be used in other areas too. If you are able to get full marks in your retests, I shall grant you any request."

"Alright, once I come back, I'm going to memorize everything in the textbook within a day. Leave it to me."

And while the commotion lasted, Marie watched the backs of Naoto and RyuZU sprint out of the manga cafe, and let out a conflicted sigh,

"…You really know how to get those two moving."

"When asking others for help, we have to talk about the benefits. That's a principle of negotiations, Milady."

Halter rubbed his bald head, and said,

"Now then, let us get going, Milady. It'll be a hassle leaving them like this."

Though he prompted Marie, Halter felt that there was something strange about it.

He wondered, As expected, was that mail really just a taunt…?

Chapter 2 – Searcher

…I'm sleepy.

The girl thought as the thick mist descended upon her.

She could not ascertain where she was, what she was doing, This situation had continued on for a long for a long time, and it had been like this all this time, especially recently when it got severe.

Her heart felt cold and dejected, like a winter freezing everything.

The puzzles, trumps, drawings, all that were interesting in the past did not seem this way anymore. There were none of those things around in the first place. And thus, there was no fun in tidying up either.

…Ahh, the girl thought.

Yes. That's why I'm always sleeping here.

There's nothing I have to do. I don't know what I want to do. That's why I can't help but want to sleep and dream.

—I wanna go back.

The sudden suddenly thought of this faintly.

Once she recalled the memory, the slightly dazed head became clear.

The room that was shone upon by the gentle sunlight, filled with toys.

There was the puzzles of words and symbols, the bear with a spring, the folding chess set, the mirror that contorts in strange ways, the barrel organ that rings when spun in reverse, and the flying bat that runs on spring energy.

She surely would be scolded by her older sister if she were to leave her toys lying about and fall asleep on that luxurious feeling, but surely it would feel very relieving.

…But the moment she thought of this again, her thoughts would be clouded. She could not recall any prior events.

Where exactly was the home she longed for…?

●

The sun was setting, about to fall.

The sky on the other end of the outer sea was gradually dyed crimson, coloring the planet of metallic armor red.

—The Clockwork Planet.as

In this world, recreated completely through gears, humans lived in cities built on gigantic gears that were several kilometers, even dozens, in

diameter. These gears spun slowly, and the teeth linked the cities, causing the equator spring to generate massive energy that would circulate through the entire world.

Amongst the millions of city gears, there was one particular gear.

Grid Kyoto was at this point about to meet the neighboring city gear, Grid Mie.

It was a colossal gear, the other end nary to be seen.

There were numerous holes peppered on it, each of them approximately 10m in diameter, neatly lined together like a beehive.

Naturally, the other meshing gear that was to mesh too had similar holes.

The massive city gears slowly meshed together, and the moment both holes met,

Both gears let out a booming noise.

It was a sharp, shrill explosion echoing, akin to thousands of cannons firing in unison.

This boom lingered for a while, ostensibly wanting to crush the gears, and immediately calmed down when the gears spun without meshing again.

—This was the cylinder train, a method of transport between cities., a scene of ‘transit’.

When the city gears mesh, the ‘connecting station’ would shoot out large cylinders containing passengers and cargo, allowing a simultaneous exchange.

The massive cylinder would then stop at the ‘platform’, where they would be sorted according to the various freight functions in the city…

Within a city, one could see spring-powered cars and buses, unmanned taxis roaming, but the cities would continue to spin without fail, and there were no permanent roads connecting one city to another.

Thus, there was a need for such unique transportation methods. However,

"…Wait, Naoto. You look like you're about to die. You alright?"

Marie, who got off from the passenger-use cylinder to the 'platform', sounded extremely astounded as she called out to Naoto, who was walking like a walking zombie.

"Shut up…I wanna ask why are you guys fine…my head still seems like it's spinning."

Naoto retorted as he groaned, pressing down on his headphones.

The passenger-use cylinders had a soundproof construct built in it, and Naoto's headphones had soundproof functions, but it seemed the noise from the 'transit' caused him much discomfort.

"…An ordinary person like me really can't imagine what a pervert who can hear even electromagnetic waves actually heard back then. Looks like those ears cause you much hardship in your daily life, huh?"

RyuZU continued to nurse the reeling Naoto, and though her presence was as normal, she spoke with an ominous tone.

"It really is an artless method of transportation. While it surely is fine for transporting cargo and organisms in the lower ranks, you do not know how to prepare a seat for the elites, and coerced Master Naoto into this suffering. Perhaps you do not know of the term Barrier-free?"

"How can there be a seat for the one and only super pervert in this world?"

Marie coldly muttered, and Halter then apologized and he continued,

"Sorry, but I didn't think about that beforehand. I first thought it would be too ridiculous to just fly to a neighboring city, and didn't think such a thing will happen."

Naoto cussed, and shook his head unsteadily, saying,

"…Ahh, well, I forgot about it. The sudden shock from before caused me to remember that there was once when I took this thing when I was a kid, and back then, I was shocked by this sound. It seemed it was so traumatic to me that I just erased it from my memories…damn it."

"I do apologize for that. I'll arrange for air transportation when we head back."

RyuZU continued to support the tottering, shaky Naoto, and the quartet walked off.

This transportation method runs several times a day, each time transporting massive numbers in one go, and thus, the terminal was filled with a mass flux of crowds moving to and fro.

In front of them was the Grid Mie.

From the existing 'connecting station' on the surface, one could transfer to the link rails that form the keystone of the city's transportation, or to the unmanned taxis that were in queue, waiting for customers.

They avoided the crowds for the time being, and moved towards at the rest space located beside the entrance. Marie was leisurely clasping her hands and supporting her chin.

"Anyway—that damned masochistic bastard who's waiting for my lashing's in this city, right?"

Kukuku. and as Marie let out a sinister snicker, Halter stared at his master with his eyes half-closed, saying,

"Ah, I suppose I don't really need to remind you, Milady, but we only have a rough guess of the place. We aren't actually certain of the exact location."

"Are you treating me as an idiot, Halter? Using the weather data of the estimated time that message was sent, and the number of times the city gear spun, my repeated calculations has narrowed it down to a radius of 500m. The original data's vague, so I can't go any further than that, but there's always a way if I compare it to the local intel. My pleasure's about to begin. Fufufu…"

Seeing Marie grin menacingly with such cockiness, Naoto, seated opposite her, was dumbfounded as he said,

"…How desperate is this girl for the sake of one single prank call?"

"Leaving aside the fact that she is unable to let go of the delusional vilification or slandering of a fool, I would say, to be precise, that she is lacking in confidence. Leaving aside yourself, Master Naoto, I suppose it is a normal reaction for someone like Master Marie to be so concerned with such words because she is so self-aware. Is there not a wise aesop in the past? That quarrels will only happen between people of the same levels."

RyuZu coldly stated these words with a smile, but Marie merely snorted.

She sarcastically closed her eyes, folded her arms, and wagged her index finger, saying,

"I see that you're mistaken, RyuZU. I'm already used to the envy, jealousy and slandering of the peasants."

"…Then, what are you so furious about?"

It seemed Naoto was feeling a lot better, and he sat upright with his eyes half-closed

"Furious? Me? Hahaha, what a joke. It's not that easy to make me angry, you know? Yes, really. I'm not furious. I'm not furious."

Marie fixed her eyes intently on Naoto, her lips curling.

“I am simply following what my big sister said. If a fine lady is to be humiliated, pursue that person with a smile on your face, elegantly hunt that person to the end of the world, and slap that person until he cries.”

“…There’s no way I want to see that big sister in my entire life.”

With his eyes half closed, Naoto blurted these words from the bottom of his heart as he sighed.

●

—Grid Mie.

Naoto was born and raised in the neighboring city, but this was the first time he visited Mie.

To begin with, moving between cities itself was not something particularly enjoyable, and there were many who never left their hometown cities from the day they were born.

However, leaving that aside, Naoto expressed his initial thoughts about Grid Mie.

“…Hot…why’s it so hot?”

The sun had already set at this time, and it was almost time for night.

But even so, it was so hot that standing under the shade was enough for him to sweat profusely.

“That’s because of the nearby Grid Shiga purged a long time back.”

Marie briefly answered as she strode forth. They were headed towards the spring-powered train, which circles the city, the Link Rail station, located at one end of the terminal.

Naoto followed her from behind, and asked,

“Is this just like what happened in Kyoto…?”

“……What exactly did you learn in school? No wonder you keep failing all your subjects.”

Marie let out a deep sigh, and shook her head.

“It’s true that in the long-term…by causing cities to fall, it’ll definitely cause damage to this planet. However, if the city malfunctions to the point of being unable to be salvaged, it’ll affect the entire planet if the city’s left alone. The first thing to do is a ‘Triage’ to prevent the damage from spreading, and that’s purging. Normally, there’s a need to follow a formal procedure to calculate and evaluate carefully. The people who lost their homes would have to be supported sufficiently.”

Marie let out a long ramble, and seemed to have finally lost it as she fanned herself with her right hand.

“…It’s really hot. The sun’s already setting, yet hot air’s still coming out…”

“It’s still better than Siberia though.”

Halter, who was converted into a cyborg, muttered while looking as if it was not his problem.

After hearing that, a surprised RyuZU tilted her head slightly as she spoke,

“How strange that is. I do remember Siberia being a frozen region as far as I can recall.

“During the time your functions stopped, June 8, 42 years ago, the Grid Neryugri.

Marie answered briefly. And Halter, following behind them, chimed in,

"The Grids south of Siberia malfunctioned. It was originally an unmanned block, and was not purged in time, and so, the surroundings seemed to have become a scorching region. The frozen lands melted, and the Baikal lake's overflowed to the point of drowning the surroundings…it affected the entire Northeast Asia. Now it has become one of the premier tourist resorts in the world, and it's bustling, to put it."

Humans are really resolute folks, Halter joked sarcastically.

Marie wiped the sweat off her face as she continued,

"Well, this is an example of what happens if you hesitate over purging and leave it alone. That's why purging is something that has to be done, but on the premise of it being a 'last resort'…"

But, Marie wondered.

This was the basis of the true terror regarding the Clockwork Planet, this absolutely ridiculous construct 'Y' constructed.

Basically, there was no permitting of any machinery lacking in spare parts.

Since it was an intricate clockwork structure, no matter how small the part that was lost, whether it was a gear, cylinder, spring, wire, the structure would instantly collapse.

But this planet defied such a logical thinking.

It was as if such a predicament was thought of beforehand, and even if the gears were faulty on a city-wide scale, the other cities would continue to run, seemingly to make up for any deficiencies.

The connectivity and linkage were absolutely complicated. A single purge alone would sometimes affect cities 4,000km away.

Thus, a 'purge' would naturally require the government's authorization, and also the agreement of international organizations and the surrounding cities.

For as the term implied, that was a 'final measure' that could potentially endanger the world.

Of course, upon thinking about this, Marie clenched her fists, and bit her lips.

"Stopping such incidents is the mission of us Clockwork technicians—huh?"

Marie let out a skeptical voice, tilting her head.

Unknowingly to her, two people vanished, and when she turned back, she found Halter standing there, scratching his head.

Marie frowned, and asked Halter,

"…Where are those two?"

"Ah, how do I put this…?"

Halter raised a finger, and Marie turned towards the direction he pointed.

Standing there was,

"Hmm!!? A swimsuit that suits RyuZU—ugh, that's difficult!"

The fool muttered in grimace as he stood in front of the mannequin placed in the shop window.

"This one…no, this one—but the swimsuit design looks inferior when compared to her quality."

"I suppose so—swimsuits were originally designed for those who felt their body sizes were lacking, to decorate those who had quite the regrettable bodies. It might be extremely difficult to found something that matches a perfect existence like me."

"That's absolutely right! I guess it's better to go to an automata exclusive clothing shop after all, right? No, I guess it's better to custom make something for your level, RyuZU—!?"

"You think we got time for that, you idiot!?"

Marie grabbed Naoto by the collar, her voice frigid to a point of below 0°C .

"It's Sunday tomorrow. After you're done with my stuff, go ahead and hold hands with the automata to the seas or the mountains however your like. Now let's go."

"Ahhh…RyuZU! I wanna think about it on the train! Get me a pamphlet!"

"Understood, Master Naoto."

●

With the refreshing creaking of metal, the ring rail raced through the perimeter of the city in the middle of the night.

Looking out from the window at the first carriage car, Naoto muttered,

"But really, this city ruins the scenery…"

The ring rail ran through the meshing of the gear cars.

In terms of planetary coordinates, the speed was merely 80km per hour.

But as it was moving in the opposite direction of the city's spinning, the relative velocity was 140km instead.

The passing scenery outside the window were buildings, buildings and more buildings with gears exposed from them. There was an occasion park to be seen, but even it was buried amongst the trail of gray streets illuminated by light gears.

"Well, it's to be expected that it would be inferior as compared to Kyoto."

Marie did not seem moved or whatsoever as she replied,

“Kyoto is one of the few sightseeing cities left in the world with a lot of heritage preserved. Mie is basically an industrial city, so this is how the scenery’s basically like.”

Naoto blinked his eyes as he stared at Marie.

“Marie, you’re more familiar with Japan than me, a Japanese?”

“Didn’t you forget that I’m an ex-Meister? World Geography’s basic knowledge to me. I should be the one asking you to know more about your neighboring cities…”

Marie yapped flabbergasted as she raised her other leg instead.

She glanced aside out of the window, and muttered,

“It was said that there was a little more nature preservation back then. That there were ‘Four seasons’.”

“Four seas?”

“Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter—this country used to be hot in the Summer, and cold in the Winter.”

Halter answered.

Naoto was stunned, tilting his head skeptically. This was the first time he had heard about such a thing.

“What was that? Something that happened 1000 years ago?”

“—No, Master Naoto. The seasonal changes did not disappear completely when I malfunctioned 200 years ago or so. In the past, the Clockwork Planet would adjust the temperatures to ‘completely replicate’ the original Earth…but it seems to have changed completely.”

It was rare for RyuZU’s answer to not contain any sarcasm.

Her eyes were staring out of the window, but seemed to be looking at something else instead.

"…Yes. It is almost at its limit, in many ways, huh?"

Marie closed her melancholic eyes as she nodded.

Silence arrived upon them.

Naoto did not understand what this meant, but he hesitated over whether to ask the question, and in the end, merely stared at the swimsuit pamphlet quietly.

—And so, a few minutes passed as the group tumbled along with the ring rail.

They then got off at the station that was at the complete opposite end of the first 'Connecting Station' they got off at, separated by the Core Tower.

Hanging above the alighting group were the starry skies, the moonlight, and the silhouette of the equatorial spring that ripped through the night sky.

"…"

While Naoto looked up at the sky, Marie showed a sinister sneer beside him.

"Now then, looking at coordinates, I think my sandbag should be around here somewhere."

"Milady, your signature bitchslapping has upgraded."

Halter snarked with a blank face, but she ignored him.

"Now, Mr Walking Navigator, do you mind investigating the exact location of this thing—hey!?"

But Naoto ignored this conversation.

He continued to stare into the void wordlessly as he walked towards the platform exit.

And RyuZU followed him without without uttering a word.

“W-wait a sec, Naoto! I can’t figure out where that crash-test dummy is without you here!?”

“So it has progressed beyond the level of just whacking him up…?”

Marie and Halter were left behind, and they too frantically gave chase.

They passed through the ticket gantry, and once they passed through, they would be at the commercial district located in front of the industrial complex.

Naoto, who first exited the station, was rooted to the spot, seemingly staring at the sky.

And Marie called him from behind.

“Wait, Naoto. What’s going on here?”

“Quiet.”

“You—”

Naoto’s cold response caused Marie to speak up without a further thought.

“Master Marie, do you mind remaining quiet for a little while?”

After hearing RyuZU’s brisk words from the side, Marie nodded slightly.

She then looked over at Naoto.

The latter still had his back facing her as he stared blankly into the sky.

Marie could recognize this back.

This was the one who deciphered the practically infinite number of gears in the Core Tower, enacting a miracle.

The gray eyes staring into the sky were able to see the ‘certain thing’ Marie could not.

—He pricked his ears to listen attentively.

Marie did not understand the reason for that.

She was already unable to comprehend the world Naoto felt.

But since Naoto deliberately did so, it meant that there was something she never realized.

…Sweat trickled down her forehead.

The meshing of the gears did not sound as loud as before, probably because this was a bustling area. The streets were relatively clean, reeking of a hot, humid air.

This was probably what Marie was able to sense.

Naoto was probably able to hear a lot more things, and after a pause, he finally spoke up.

He said,

“—I can’t hear anything.”

……

“Wh-what are you fooling around with—?”

Marie nearly tumbled heavily due to the sudden surprise.

But Naoto continued to stare deep into the bustling streets, the industrial complex he could barely see.

And Halter suddenly spoke up,

"—What time is it now?"

"Eh?"

The entire group stared at Halter, including Marie.

"The time. What's the time now? I'm guessing it's around 7pm or so…"

"Looking at the Japanese Kansai Standard Time, the time now is 18:58:23—I see, it really is weird"

After hearing RyuZU's reply "What's that about", Marie was about to ask, only to quiet down.

She then realized it.

She frantically looked around, and before she could say what she realized, Halter spoke up,

"—Isn't it too quiet?"

7pm at night, in front of the station.

The sun had completely set, and the lights from the light gears lit the surroundings.

The spacious roads were devoid of wind, the hot, humid air stagnating heavily, and only the heat released from the roads that were exposed to the day whiffed by the skins of the quartet who remained still.

It was so hot, yet Marie shivered.

There was no passer-by to be seen, and the opened shops were lifeless.

The operating shops looked a little old, yet the outside looked to have a little fanciful designs to them. While they all had their shutters raised, there were no customers to be seen. There were constructs at the cross junctions of the road, probably functioning as police boxes, yet there was no person in sight.

It was an empty bustling street—how did she not realize this paradox?

There was nothing more mysterious than this place.

This place was basically,

"A ghost city…"

Marie was left flabbergasted as she muttered in a groaning manner.

●

The location was the outskirts of the Grid Mie heavy industry complex, and there was a tall tower that allowed a full view of the entire place.

It was a watchtower built on a hill, in the middle of a path trail.

The sun had sight, and this place, devoid of human presence, was left with only 4 shadows.

One of them, Naoto, was leaning his body out from the railing, narrowing his eyes as he gathered his concentration.

The vast scenery he could see was the industrial complex at night, buried by the numerous light gears.

This complicated collection of metal was akin to an organ formed using unknown machinery. It was a little terrifying, but the riveting sight was breathtakingly beautiful and majestic.

…However.

“I can’t hear anything after all.”

Naoto said with a soft, yet audible voice.

“I can’t hear anything. This clocktower **has stopped**—like it’s completely empty.”

The air suddenly felt heavy.

Marie’s voice was tangled in her throat, and seemingly wanting to affirm this, she said,

“…Do you know what you’re saying?”

That quivering voice was dry.

The Clock Tower had stopped.

The words were few and brisk, but what exactly was with this sort of an anomalous situation?

This was not simply the case of lowered functionality and causing extra burden on other Clock Towers. if the Core Tower was the brain of a city, the Clock Tower would surely be the vital organs. They were the lifelines of the city’s functions, to a point where there would be no benefit in swapping out any of them.

For example, the human body cannot perform its vital functions if it is lacking in any organs.

As the ex-Meister who partaked in many city maintenances, Marie was clearly able to imagine what would have happened.

Naoto turned his head back, and saw the exceptionally terrified look on her face, blood practically drained from her face.

“That’s why now, this isn’t just on the level of ‘abnormal’. This entire street is already.”

She gasped

“Dead, that’s what it is.”

“!!”

A bead of sweat trickled down Naoto’s cheek. It was not due to the steaming heat, and his limbs, trembling slightly, clearly indicated that was not the case.

In the midst of the silence, RyuZU narrowed her eyes sharply as she said.

“I see. So this is the reason why ‘there is no wind’ on this street.”

With this line, Marie and Halter widened their eyes.

At this time, the industrial complex in front of their eyes should be facing that thing called the ‘sea’.

Thus, it was impossible not to have wind. Despite this however, there was nary a breeze blowing at the watchtower.

“…This really isn’t something that simple.”

Halter muttered in a groan.

An ill premonition rose up his spine as he let out a sigh.

He did feel that something was amiss before they departed, and this was turning into a terrifying reality for him.

He turned his stare towards a silent Marie beside him, and said,

“Milady, I think it’s good to re-analyse that transmission again, you know?”

“Eh?”

“Normally, I won’t say anything if you have any grievances, Milady, but now that things have soured, I suppose the situation has changed, right?”

“…What’s going on?”

Halter nodded slightly, placed a hand on his forehead, and let out a sigh.

"First off…the premise is that the microwave transmission can't reach a wide range."

"I already know that. In other words, that guy—"

She cut off her words.

Marie's face gradually became one of understanding, and Halter nodded slightly.

She recalled the taunting mail that was sent.

The prank mail that was deliberately sent using microwaves, a fossilized technology in this era.

If she were to calm down and think about it, there were too many skeptical points about this.

Marie let out a pant, licked her lips, and said,

"If that message really is sent to me, the one able to send it—needs a few prerequisites."

"That's how it is. One of them is obvious is that you're still alive and living in Kyoto, Milady. The other is…"

"The one able to receive this message—in other words, someone who knows that you're with me, Halter."

Marie continued off from where halter left off, and nodded.

And with the duo's conversation, Naoto seemed to have thought of something as he said,

"Ah, I see, uncle. Didn't you say back then that those guys doing 'special jobs' are also using wireless transmissions?"

"It's not some standard equipment actually, but…"

Halter let out a wry smile as he nodded.

"It's not rare to have such a function installed in cyborg prosthetics that engages in unique—illegal activities. I too have it, and many infiltration troops or agents would have such things too."

Also, Halter pondered.

If that person was using such prosthetics, it would not be a surprise to for him to have information about them.

—Marie Bell Breguet died, and the terrorist who leaked the information remained at large.

But that was simply just wanted was officially stated on the surface.

For the information syndicates, the information bureau of the 5 Enterprises for example, Marie and Halter's current locations and identities were basically an open secret.

And so, *naturally,* Halter continued.

"I'm not saying that the possibility of it being just a prank is zero. Maybe it was just a transmission sent in all directions many times, and that maybe the original recipient wasn't meant to be Marie. Looking at this current situation however, let's forget this for the time being and go back to the start again."

"In other words, why this sender decided to use eletromagnetic waves, huh?"

Marie nodded, and pondered.

For the time being, they would erase all pre-existing hints, including whether Halter did receive the message by chance.

It was already a severe crime to use electromagnetic waves without any permit.

It was way too risky to send this prank that may not reach its target.

Marie clasped her hands together, pressing it against her little chin.

And so, the first thing she thought of was—

"…A 'trap'?"

"If that's the case, some conditions are lacking."

Halter immediately denied this, and looked over to Naoto."

"There's a higher chance of it being a prank, but even if we do get baited, we can't possibly track him down without Naoto here."

"…In other words, it's not enough intel for him to lure us out."

"Before that, wasn't it you who went rampaging and not letting it go because of the mail, Milady—my apologies. Please continue."

Halter muttered, only to stop himself when Marie shot him a dirty glare.

"In that case…it probably is a 'warning'. Or rather."

"A 'notification'? That doesn't give a reason as to why he would use a microwave transmission."

Halter shrugged his shoulders.

No matter what sort of message it was, it would be meaningless if it did not reach its target.

For the sender to take such unnecessary risk, there clearly was a reason why he used an electromagnetic transmission.

What if?, Marie lifted her face.

"Maybe there's a possibility that this electromagnetic transmission itself is a message."

"Isn't it too indirect? It'll be better to just write it out, or maybe convert it into a code."

“But what if…he was forced to do this?”

“Using an electromagnetic transmission instead of a gear transmission in this era? What kind of situation can that be…?”

Halter groaned as he sighed.

And so, Naoto, who had been silent till this point, suddenly raised his hand.

With a smile, he said in a single breath.

“I see. The mystery’s all solved now!”

“…”

Marie and Halter gave Naoto incredulous looks in response to his words.

And with those looks, Naoto looked extremeley serious as he muttered,

“What’s with this cold reaction?”

“No, that’s because…”

Halter averted his eyes skeptically, and Marie sighed, saying,

“What do you want to say? Let’s hear from you.”

She prompted him to continue on with a disbelieving voice.

Naoto nodded, and confidently boasted, saying,

“In other words—there’s a possibility of there being an Initial-Y series over here, no?”

……

Marie closed her eyes to ponder Naoto's words, regurgitating them.

"—Erm, well."

"Yeah?"

With a tender smile of a kindergarten child, Marie said to a confident Naoto.

"None of those are related, you know? I already began to feel this way when I first met you, but now my mind's blown, you know? It's fine, I guess you'll be fine drinking some medicine…a bit better, maybe."

"No, hear me out a little. You'll understand it if you think about it normally."

Naoto's eyes were half-closed as he muttered, and Marie sighed,

"Is that so? I really have no idea where you got that name from."

"—I see. So that is how it is."

RyuZU suddenly interrupted.

"The sender was trying to transfer some information, and yet was unable to do so in that suitable. If we assume that to be the situation—there is such a possibility."

Marie frowned skeptically.

Why would she be saying such a thing too? Marie wonder. Naoto's sudden ramblings were not something that actually began at this moment, but even RyuZU at least would have some semblance of sanity in his mind, excluding the fact that she had a ridiculous swear filter function.

And so, Halter spoke up, seemingly to express Marie's doubt,

"…I'm really sorry, Missy. I'm stupid, so I can't understand what you just said…"

“Yes, that may be the case, but there is no need to despair that might. Your self-awareness makes you akin to a Mr Rotten Metal that is ranked higher than mitochondria.”

RyuZU solemnly concluded, and narrowed her eyes.

“This sender may have met my little sister.”

—Eh? And all that were present turned to look at RyuZU.

“Did you not say it beforehand? ‘It’s not rare to have such a function installed in cyborg prosthetics that engages in unique—illegal activities’ The sender may have been forced to use this microwave transmission. Assuming that the sender was already in that predicament, it can be deduced that it was not under ordinary circumstances, but during a mission instead.”

RyuZU calmly continued with her words.

“Supposing that the sender encountered a predicament beyond his expectations while in the midst of gathering information, and was unable to escape. His final means would be send a code to you, Master Marie? This would indicate that the sender was involved in such a situation.”

“Ohh, as to be expected of you, RyuZU! Yes yes yes, this is what I want to say!”

Naoto nodded excitedly.

But Halter stroked his chin skeptically,

“In other words…that certain thing’s a member of the Initial-Y series?”

“Oh? Do you have any disagreements with that?”

"That's the only issue I have here. There are quite a few situations in missions where we can't escape, and alive aside that, what reason would someone an agent undertaking a mission provide intel to our Milady? I dare say the sender's not a Breguet."

"I do not know that much, but I do not think that is something that important."

"No, isn't that the biggest mystery…?"

While Halter muttered, Marie merely nodded slightly.

"But if an agent undertaking the mission is the sender—this condition can explain why the 'resonating gears' aren't used, but microwaves instead."

"Yo, Milady."

"This theory may be a little far-fetched, but anything is possible till this point. Leaving aside why I'm the receiver, there's only one doubt left, the real intent of the message."

That message. That transmission was the reason why Marie came to this place.

That was,

"—Hey Bitch. Aren't you getting all too jumpy over there, you ghost girl? Are you not satisfied because your little hole hasn't received anything? Are you waiting for the little big cock to fuck that thing you have? Shake your cute little ass and beg me here, you Nympho."

That was it.

RyuZU narrated it fluently like a repeated broadcast.

Marie smiled savagely as the veins popped out of her temples

"—Even if it was really something beneficial, I'm definitely going to hang that guy."

Marie hissed such a declaration, but RyuZU ignored her as she continued on solemnly,

“But pardon my directness, Master Naoto, is there really a code in there? Though the other person is uncouth, he really is insightful, no? I can only see truth in this no matter how I think about this.”

“You wanna get wrecked!? I’m a virgin!!”

“…Oh?”

“…!”

She just declared that she was a virgin in the wilderness.

Completely enraged and embarrassed, Marie’s face was flushed red as she turned away, her clenched fists quivering madly.

Halter pressed down the shoulders of this girl who was about to explode at this point, and continued on with the topic,

“…Anyway, assuming that our hypothesis is correct, let’s think about it. First—well, the little big cock to fuck part? This does seem like a strange way of describing it.”

Naoto folded his arms, and spoke up,

“Normally thinking—well, what does that mean? Little, big, that thing?”

“Well, the word ‘cock’ does have the meaning of ‘bird’ and ‘stopper’.”

Halter gave a wry smile, and continued,

“Also, there’s the meaning of ‘nonsense’ or ‘wind vane’—or it can also have the meaning of ‘whim’. Also, though I’m not willing to consider it this way, but back when I was in the army…”

At this moment, Halter froze. A still-agitated Marie glanced diagonally upwards at him, prompting him to continue,

"What?"

Halter gasped,

"…That's what we call the 'firing hammer'."

—

Silence descended upon them.

Marie's narrowed her eyes sharply, lowered her head, and pressed her right hand on her chest.

"…In other words, it means that there's a little weapon that's big in firepower?"

"Yeah. But I have to say this, a gun that requires a cocking motion nowadays is—"

"I get what you're saying. Cocking, an antique? Little and big, antique arms, arms…"

Marie continued to mutter in rhythm, and suddenly looked towards RyuZU, standing beside her.

"…? What is the matter?"

RyuZU's skeptically tilted her head, but Marie ignored her as she bit her lips.

—The first model of the Initial-Y series.

An antique automata which could easily wreck all modern weapons.

…Maybe this is really what it's hinting at. She thought.

"A small big cock (small, powerful, weapon)…?"

After hearing Marie's little mutter, RyuZU simply showed a sweet smile.

And then, she lifted her skirt, the hem letting loose an ominous gear grinding sound.

“Master Marie, you actually called me a male reproductive organ. My apologies, I have never realized that you were so irked with life. I shall now fulfill your wish.”

Accompanying the words were the black scythes that could easily sever heavy-armored automatas.

Marie raised her hands, shrieking,

“Wait, woah!!! I-I don’t mean that way!”

And then, an inspiration struck her.

She turned her head to Naoto, and standing there was a boy who looked nonchalant and stupid, yet arrogant and uncouth if seen in another direction.

This guy just made that guess instinctively…?

Marie narrowed her eyes.

There were flaws in that guess, and there were many ways of refuting that guess no matter what, and the logic was a little far-fetched. Even so, she could not deny his thinking, just that it was extremely unlikely and ridiculous.

And in any circumstances, the chances of him being correct was not zero.

The most important crux to this was that his almost unnatural trail of thoughts was able to conclude this so quickly. Marie did see such instances before.

Marie’s older sister, or a few of the Meisters she worked with, were of this category themselves. They were people with astounding instincts, able to conclude through their instincts, not by getting the answers through logical deductions and verifications, but to skip the entire process to obtain the correct answer…

Their ideas were typically so out of the world.

But even so, with some actual verification, they would be deemed to be almost completely perfect.

Assuming that a person like Naoto Miura, who had such a superhuman-like abnormality, was that sort of person, perhaps his instincts were infinitely closer to the truth…

Marie groaned silently, and then slowly opened her mouth to admit.

"—It may sound stupid, but there may be an Initial-Y series model here."

"You serious, Milady?"

And Halter spoke up.

Marie met his surprised look right in the eyes, and waved her hand.

"I don't have any intel regarding where the Initial-Y series are. I can't deny that there's a possibility of it being here."

"No, we're still not certain if it's referring to the Initial-Y series, and I guess there are still other explanations…isn't this getting too far-fetched?"

"I know that very well. I just can't deny it completely, and in fact—"

Marie stared at the street below.

If it was a ghost city as Naoto had said, a faux city ripped of its gears,

"…We can only go inside and check it out ourselves."

"Yeah! In other words, we're going to find another of the Initial-Y series, right? I wanna take part in this sandbag thing! How can I not be involved if you do find RyuZU's little sister? I'll be so envious! Let's go, RyuZU!"

"You're really the same as usual…"

After hearing Naoto boast his desires, Marie shook her head.

And Halter, standing beside her, slouched his back slightly, saying,

"…I really wouldn't recommend you guys to take action without being certain of the intel."

Marie nods in response to that advice, but shrugged her shoulders.

"…Either way, things aren't going to change. The guy who knows about us did send a transmission that logically couldn't be tracked down from such a mysterious place."

"That's the case, but,"

"Maybe it's not about the Initial-Y series, but the chances of this being a trap or a warning aren't very high either. In that case, maybe this is 'provided intel' from a certain person who's cornered."

"…You're being surprisingly calm, you know?"

After hearing Halter ask this, Marie raised an eye flexibly, saying,

"Do you think this Princess really will go crazy just because of that little taunt?"

"I do think that's the case. Am I wrong?"

"Of course—naturally, I'm going to slaughter that sender later."

Halter went silent as he rolled his eyes at Marie.

The latter snorted as she lifted her chin, saying,

"I'm saying this not because I'm overwhelmed by emotions. In fact, with your experience, my expertise, Naoto's senses and RyuZU's fighting strength, it's easy for this group here to break into the factory complex, right? If we can't get anything after probing a little, we'll just hurry up and retreat."

…*Hm.* Halter nodded, his arms folded as he touched his chin.

Marie was certainly right about this. They were not intruding upon a military base, and if they were to fully utilize the skills of all the present members, breaking into the factory should be a cinch.

If they were able to get intel, they would definitely be able to find out their next course of action, assuming that they would not lose anything even if they do miss.

And it was true that they could not leave this anomaly alone…

"…"

However, Halter wondered.

He could not refute the logic, but neither could he agree with it.

It was not because the idea was ridiculous; surely that was not the problem. No matter what Halter himself felt, he could be certain it was correct as long as Marie felt that there was a possibility.

But even so, the back of his neck was stinging painfully despite him being unable to describe it in detail.

—He had a bad feeling about this.

It was not the instinct Naoto had displayed, and neither was it the logical deduction Marie had used.

To put it somehow, it was the countless experience he had accumulated. The faint scene of danger held only by those ordinary people who passed through the hail of bullets, went through hellish situations of life-endangering moments, those cowards.

To put it another way, that was simply it.

In fact, Marie's assessment of their battle abilities was correct.

She was an ex-Meister, a genius. Leaving aside her wrestling skills, she could easily hold her own against an ordinary automata with its Coil Spear unleashed. Halter himself was a full-body cyborg who had the Breguets' latest cutting-edge technology incorporated in him. Most problems could be solved by the two of them alone, and also—

There was Naoto, whose insight was able to even decipher the latest Vacheron stealth weapon, the Goliath

And then there was RyuZU, the Initial-Y series model who had such overwhelming functions; any machinery pitted against her would be powerless.

As Marie had said, there should be no problems.

…But no matter how many times he affirmed this, Halter was unable to rid himself of his anxiety.

●

It was a massive factory located near the outskirts of the Heavy Industrial Complex.

In the midst of that Industrial Complex that had practically ceased to run, the factory alone continued to operate. Marie would not tell from the outside what sort of a factory that was.

The quartet, who arrived at this place due to Naoto's instincts, observed from the metal tower that was slightly further away.

Patrolling around the factory were guards dressed in the 'Military' uniforms.

Marie lowered her posture as she peeked in on the situation, saying,

"Looks like…it isn't completely empty here."

"They can't just leave all the guard work to automatas anyway."

Halter answered as he turned to look behind.

Right in front of his eyes was Naoto, who had his eyes closed as he lowered his head. He was not wearing the trademark headphones this time.

He had the abnormal hearing sense to eavesdrop on conversations despite the 100% noise cancelling functions, and this time, he had complete grasp of the entire facility down below.

His eyes still closed he said,

"…The facility looks rather large here. It's very normal on the surface, but the walls inside are extremely thick, and the work area's wide. From the underground, it looks like 4 areas can be assessed. At the bottom of it all is an extremely, unnaturally large space, and…what's this? It's not running properly, but there's 'something'."

Marie frowned, and turned her head back to Naoto.

"What something?"

"It's not activated right now, so I'm not too sure about it…but it's really big. It's about the city of an entire city—a building?"

"…I see. That's suspicious. Any entrance you found?"

"Can I tell you the construction, location of the surveillance and where the guards are?"

"That's good enough. Please."

Marie nodded, and opened a blank map in her mind.

After hearing Naoto's report, she drew an intrusion route on the blank sheet in her mind.

After hearing the necessary information needed for infiltration, Marie slowly got up. Halter, standing beside her, raised her petite frame single-handedly, but the former did not mind as she stared at the surface of the watch wrapped around her arm—and took a breath.

“Now’s the time.”

Halter jumped.

The displacement from this roof to the targeted factory was approximately 100m.

And Halter covered that distance in a single leap.

He let out a soft little thud as he landed on the concrete roof.

And a beat later, RyuZU, carrying Naoto, silently gave chase.

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They were inside the factory of concrete and reinforcement bars.

The passageway was exceptionally wide, easy for equipment to be moved. The light gears set at fixed intervals apart caused the passageway to be lit completely white.

Walking along this passageway was a young man dressed in white robes, probably a researcher. He was accompanied by a little 4-legged automata.

As he walked on, the man read the stack of papers in his hand, probably some documents, before stopping in his tracks. The automata beside him too let out a creaking as it stopped.

He turned around.

“…?”

Nothing.

The man tilted his head, and let out a sigh. Perhaps he was thinking too much when he senses a stare, maybe.

Letting out a wry smile, he turned his stare back.

"—Bonsoir."

Standing in front of him was a blond pretty girl smiling at him, speaking fluent French.

The man was left flabbergasted, and the simple-minded automata, reacting to such a situation, drew out the gun it had within as it let out a monotonous warning,

"Intruder spotted—"

The next moment, the man was knocked out from a hit at the back of his neck, and the automata at his feet was silently severed into scraps at the same time.

"Bonne Nuit."

Marie watched the man and machine slump onto the floor as she muttered.

And Halter, who knocked the man out from behind, scratched his head, saying,

"—This intrusion is getting too easy, hey."

10 minutes, or just 10 minutes, had passed from the moment they began their intrusion as they easily got to the elevator leading to the bottom most level of the factory.

It was not that the security was too lax here. For a normal factory, it could be said to be too much, but Marie merely shrugged with a complacent look.

"Naoto's able to identify where the guards and surveillance equipment are, and even identify the entire construct of the building. Security practically doesn't exist here…your ears are really convenient here. If such an ability's revealed to the world, I guess you'll be vivisected for research, you know?"

Or maybe I should do this. With such an added implication, she turned to Naoto, who's carried around by RyuZU, who carried him on the back.

Naoto didn't respond. His physical abilities were subpar, and after considering the fatigue of moving around and sudden dangers, RyuZU was tasked to carry him around and let him focus on his hearing. However…

"…"

Marie noticed the perverted looking eyes he had as he looked around RyuZU's shoulders, and what he was exactly focusing on was plain for all to see.

Trying her best to eke out a smile, Marie called out to him,

"Naotoooo—!?"

"—Heh? Oh, no, I'm not thinking that I won't get scolded if I'm to touch those titties at this moment, really, I swear!"

Naoto tried to defend himself with blatant lies, and RyuZU merely said with a nonchalant look,

"—Master Naoto, if you really wish to vent your primal lust, please rub them as you wish, for I do not have the right to say no."

"Eh? Really? But for some reason, this complicated heart of a man just wilted after hearing you say that—"

"Whatever, can we just leave that for later!?"

Marie closed her frozen eyes slightly as she hissed, and head towards the double doors down the passageway in front of them.

The doors were shut, and the wall beside it had panel buttons installed in it.

This was a unique elevator that required the correct password to use.

“Can you crack it?”

“—It’s the same as the ones in the upper levels. Just remove the 36th hook from the right on the 4th level to open it.”

“Understood.”

With this brief reply, Marie moved her hands.

The panel beside the door slid open, and the screw floated as if it was zero gravity. Within the wall were many gear locks.

Even a skilled clockwork technician would require several hours to cautiously open this lock, yet Marie fumbled around it it, and pulled out the 36th hook from the right of the 4th row, a spare part as small as a a little finger nail, as if it was a magic trick, before shutting it back like time had reversed.

The doors let out a whoosh as it readily opened.

“Right, let’s go. Down below, right?”

“Yeah.”

After hearing Naoto nod without hesitation, Marie hopped into the elevator enthusiastically.

And Halter, watching her from behind, could not help but let out a sigh.

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—The detector that was able to decipher facility securities better than any hi-specification sonars, Naoto.

—The technician that was able to use that information and immobilize any systems at a godlike speed, Marie.

—The one able to wreck anything, even a heavy-armored automata without any retaliation allowed, RyuZU.

With these people present, any number of guards or security would be meaningless. One would even suspect if they could easily break in like this even if it was the headquarters of the 5 Enterprises.

No matter how potent the security system in, none of them would last against Naoto and Marie.

And for those physical obstacles that could not be unlocked by codes, RyuZU's scythe would rip them apart in less than a second.

Whether it was the latest traps or surveillance installations, all would be meaningless.

They would immediately discover, dissect and destroy them. They would either discover the patrol guards, researchers, even automatas beforehand, or neutralize them.

They were intruding into a facilities with such a tight security network, yet this trio had the attitude of one being here for a social studies trip or something.

…If this was not called foul play, what else could?

If I were to see this during his days in the army, I would have resigned without hesitation. Halter thought.

…However, it had yet to vanish.

The stinging pain of uneasiness lingering around his neck got stronger by the moment.

While underground, on the elevator leading to the deepest part, Marie stared at Halter, and said,

"What's the matter, Halter? Looks like you're bothered."

"…No, it's nothing."

He shook his head in response to Marie's words, but frowned.

The infiltration was proceeding well, too well, to a point where one could not help but let his guard down.

But what exactly was this mysterious feeling this body of his felt—no.

Halter quietly let out a sigh.

He knew this feeling very well. He had such a feeling before.

This, yes.

The moment when his allied forces were well armed, and the enemy resistance was few, the feeling a complacency as they moved forward.

—During such moments, they would encounter things beyond their expectations. For example, that might be the moment…when his team had leaped into the enemy's kill zones.

It was the feeling that some extraordinary situation would be awaiting them, or to be precise, *firm belief*.

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"Ah, wait…I hear something."

Naoto suddenly spoke up as he placed his hand at his ear.

Marie asked,

"What is it?"

"It's a soft voice, and I can't really hear it clearly, but it sounds like the total number of 'parts that don't exist', actually no, it's far more than that…"

"From where?"

"From about, 74,850m below us."

"About 75km below…? That's impossible."

Marie immediately denied this, causing Naoto to curl his lips in a pout,

“Why?”

“*Because there’s nothing there.* It’s further than the bottom of the Core Tower. When the Clockwork Planet was constructed, those massive number of gears were made out of the cold crust and mantle of this planet. That’s why the planet is hollow, and if there’s something right below, it’s at most the completely frozen planet core—”

Till this point, Marie seemingly thought of something, and muttered,

“Or it might be the other constructed space below the city later on. That’s it…”

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After an hour and a half, the elevator reached the deepest part of the factory.

The doors opened, and they exitd. The wall beside had the frame ’25th level’ hanging at the wall by the side. As far as Marie knew, this was the lowest level of this Grid Mie.

Once they exited the elevator, they hopped into the floor, and it was a wide, spacious place, forming a large vault. The light gears installed on the walls glowed, turning the surroundings as bright as day.

Naoto slowly moved forward, walked towards the middle of this wide space, and turned his head around, kicking the floor slightly.

“It’s below here. There’s still a hole here…’something’.”

Marie looked at the floor without uttering a word. The floor was covered with metal panels, and there were protective layers, shells, and then there was a basement far below it, in other words, outside the city.

Naoto said that there was something down there.

"…Let's confirm it. There's still a floor below it, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. I don't know where the entrance is however."

After seeing Naoto nod, Marie narrowed her eyes.

"I guess that floor needs to be accessed from the Core Tower. This is just the bottom of the city, and there's no entrance here in the first place."

"Then, what do we do?"

"Just cut the floor up and go down."

Marie simply said this nonchalantly.

"A Coil Spear should be able to cut through this method. Move back."

"No, wait, the space below…it's tall—like 327.3m tall, you know?"

"…Isn't that space too big? Well, assuming that Naoto's carried by RyuZU…I guess Halter's legs won't be able to handle this. We'll just use some anchor wire."

"…Understood."

Halter answered briefly, but he narrowed his eyes.

His expression was tense, ostensibly ready to get into action as he remained wary.

"Don't let your guard down, Milady. I've been sensing something bad for quite a while."

"I know. All these aren't normally no matter how we think about it."

Marie nodded, and swung the Coil Spear.

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The four of them leapt into the hole that was cut out.

They entered free-fall from more than 300m in height, but RyuZU showed no worse as she carried Naoto while elegantly adjusting herself in mid-air.

A few seconds later, Halter, hanging from a wire, descended with Marie.

Marie got out from Halter's clutches, and blinked a few times.

"…It's dark."

It was pitch darkness, nary a single light. She could not see her own limbs very well, let alone the face of Halter standing beside her. She looked up at the ceiling they were at, and saw that in the midst of the darkness, there was a glowing hole akin to a full moon.

Naoto sounded a little terrified as he said,

"—Hear me out, Marie, this thing is…"

"Wait, I'm not a pervert like you who knows everything just from a sound. Let me light it up a little before we continue."

Once Marie said this she transformed the Coil Spear with a single swing.

She pointed the gun upwards, and fired a flashbang.

Because of the flashbang, the wide space was immediately shrouded in day-like light, due to the flash gears spinning rapidly.

And so, that thing appeared from the darkness.

"—Are you kidding me?"

Halter groaned when he saw that scene.

Why is it that those bad feelings of mine always happen without exception?

"…What, is…this…?"

And Marie widened her eyes, speechless. Halter clicked his tongue.

"What else can it be?"

He gasped.

"—Like hell it's something, shitty droopy eyes!"

Halter's eyes sharpened behind those thick-colored sunglasses.

—Over there was a hill of iron.

There was no other description of it. It was extremely massive, overly massive, truly massive. Any person seeing it could only comprehend of it this way.

No matter how they tried to look up, they were unable to grasp its entire form.

But even so, Marie barely managed to feel some depth as she tried to observe, and found it to resemble a spider.

It was a shocking large, multi-legged thing, probably an automata.

It was hard to believe that such a **thing** could actually move, and one had to suspect which lunatic would say such a thing. To the ex-Meister Marie however, that was how it appeared on the surface.

But even so—this size was way beyond common sense.

One of its folded legs alone was as large as a skyscraper. Those legs covered over the black armored plates that were like scales, equipped with so many cannons it would be foolish to even begin counting.

The frame itself was so big even a luxurious cruise or a fleet mothership would be a mere boat compared to it, the armor itself littered with countless cannon muzzles like a hedgehog.

There was no need for Naoto's hearing to comprehend this.

That this—was some enormous weapon, and there was no room to doubt it.

Marie spoke up, eking a voice,

"—Halter, do you remember…what's the first article of the ISS (International Stability Systems) regarding the limiting of military might?"

"All massive weapons of destruction that will fatally damage the city structures—the planetary structures, or severely threaten the human biosphere are thorough banned from being researched, created and owned. Am I correct?"

"…Then, unless I'm drunk on caffeine right now, this joke-like thing in front of my eyes now looks like a super Dreadnought kind of a destructive weapon…"

Is it my imagination? Marie chanted this, her voice dry and hoarse.

"Yeah, that thing's definitely a real deal unless it's a paper machete or something."

Halter's voice too was not calm in the slightest.

While the duo remained still, Naoto threw from at the large object from beside them. A metal shrapnel as large as the palm spun as it hit the deck of the weapon, letting out a clang.

Once the weak echo vanished completely, Naoto said,

"…There's probably something I shouldn't be telling the professionals Master Marie and Mr Halter here, but can I?"

"…What?"

"This really is a bad situation."

"Yeah, we know."

Marie stared at the ceiling blankly, and continued,

"Now, Naoto, the one with the unique superpower, do you might giving us a detailed insight as to—how bad it is right now?"

"…First off, I can conclude that is where the parts of the Clock Tower went to."

That line alone caused Marie to gasp.

—A single clock tower was turned into this weapon?

"I see…so this is the reason why the 'city's dead."

"Isn't it supposed to be a 1000 years ago when the Japanese love their humongous robots…?"

Halter groaned as he rubbed his bald head.

But Naoto shook his head, and continued,

"That isn't all that it is now. This one's not completely activated now, so I can't be certain, but—it uses at least 6 times the parts used for the 'sounds that couldn't be heard'."

Marie silently raised a hand. She narrowed her eyes, blocking the light from the flashbang, and stared at the gigantic weapon to estimate the size.

"Naoto, I can't see how big this thing is exactly. You know how big it is?"

"I say, are you treating me as a sensor or something now—?"

"Just answer me already!"

"I can't really tell since it's not fully operational right now, but I can guess from the gears spinning right in front and the sounds right at the back that it's 320m tall and 932m wide, damn it!! Adding on, I can sense that it's completely ready to be activated!! Furthermore—!"

Naoto pointed diagonally left in front, saying,

"I hear 42 set of footsteps approaching us here, and there's another 18 multi-legged things with unnaturally heavy footsteps, all filled with such killing intent! Shit, fuck!"

—*Our infiltration was exposed?* Marie gritted her teeth.

However, they could not leave this weapon alone no matter what it was.

"RyuZU."

"Yes. Is there a reason why you are being so overly familiar with me?"

"–Can your scythe break this armor?"

RyuZU tilted her head in silence upon being asked this, and the moment she turned her eyes to the deck of that gigantic weapon.

The skirt swayed slightly, and the scythe reached out at a speed the eye could not distinguish.

—And then, there was a sharp, crisp sound, sparks spluttering.

"!?"

RyuZU's eyes widened in shock, a rarity at that. She looked back at forth between her black scythe and the armored deck that was slightly damaged in scrutiny, curling her lips.

"…This truly is surprising. I see that despite the mosquito-like brains of humans, by foolishly emphasizing their 'extreme stubborness', they are

unexpectedly able to accomplish something beyond expectations—now this is a new discovery."

Marie had her eyes half-closed as she asked

"—In other words, you can destroy it? Or you can't?"

"So Master Marie, you are asking me if I can cut a tungsten alloy with a kitchen knife? Such a question truly shows a deplorable mental capab—"

"Just tell me the conclusion already!"

Marie cut off RyuZU's words, and ran off.

"Let's hurry and gather the data, evidence, anything we can get. Once we're done, let's scream!"

"Eh, wait, this is really alright?"

In response to Naoto's voice from behind, Marie growled without looking back,

"That Super Technology Scrap down there's something we can't even think of crossing 'scythes' with. What do you want me to do!?"

"But isn't this thing very dangerous!?"

"I'm a clockwork technician, not a war mercenary!"

This isn't a joke Marie thought.

…Yes, this really was not a joke.

In the current era, the strongest weapons for city combat were heavy-armed automata. Using the current line of technology, there was nothing that could currently surpass the heavy-armed automata either in terms of attack power, or defense capabilities.

And RyuZU's scythe could even slice apart the armor of heavy-armed automata. That alone was an utterly ridiculous fact, yet…

Her attack was completely futile here?

In other words, it meant that current existing weapons would have practically no use against that armor.

—Or rather, even if the conclusion may be a little unreasonable, the weapons used for 'city combat' at least would be unable to wreck through that armor.

It would be a different case altogether it was a situation of a 'battle outside the city'—weapons situated in no-man's land.

The military capabilities limit was imposed by the ISS, like the uses of Resonance Cannon, the heavy arms that shoots Super Frequency Bullets, or just some simple high powered limited edition weapons. No matter how potent the armor was, perhaps these weapons could puncture through them.

The problem here would be the 'size'.

Once so many of these weapons used for combat outside cities were to be used on such a gigantic weapon.

"Won't it mind that no city can remain safe anymore…!?"

Marie clenched her fists as she lambasted.

But again, she thought.

—Anyway, what's this thing built for?

That was a weapon, and surely it had to be used for military purposes.

But even if they are weapons, different weapons have different characteristics. Weapons are tools that needed an astonishing amount of money to obtain, and thus, there had to be an existing 'concept'. For example, a concept to invade, to defend, or simply to exist and kept with the view of it being a deterrence.

…That gigantic weapon did not seem to belong to any of those categories.

If an automata of that size was to actually move, the results would be plain to see.

Any city would be left wasted once that thing moved, whether it would be for invasion or defense. Even if it was used for deterrence, it was so extraordinarily big.

In that case—

Marie felt darkness shrouding her eyes, and groaned.

Once that thing moved, a city would be destroyed.

There was a way to destroy it just as it was destroyed before.

But surely that would cause a city to be taken down with it.

s—In other words, that would mean that it was that kind of a weapon.

"You killing me…!"

A weapon that destroys cities?

That would be a weapon that destroys the world.

Which idiots in the world built such a thing for that purpose?

…They would have to gather information to learn about this.

The enemies' identities, objectives, weapon structures, specific capabilities, weaknesses—there were a lot of things for them to investigate. They had to find something like a blueprint or a transmission record, and then

"Hm…?"

"—Stop, Milady."

Only two people managed to notice **that presence**

In response to Halter's sharp command to stop, Marie turned around.

●

Standing there was a very young girl.

Marie, who reacted a little later, muttered,

"—A, kid?"

No.

That was an automata.

A girl automata that was smaller and more petite even compared to the miniature Marie.

She was wearing a red and white dress, the left arm and leg covered in silver armor.

She had a cube pendant at her chest, and there was a gear ring above her head, like an angelic halo.

The girl had an innocent and pure appearance, yet on her face was a menacing look black mask.

—And that black mask alone looked extremely extraordinary and ominous.

Sweat trickled down Marie's forehead, and she felt a chill up her spine. Halter took a step forward, spreading his arms wide to protect her.

…To any observer seeing this, this surely would be a strong sight to behold.

The cyborg man was actually on his guard as much as possible against this young girl automata.

But Marie neither found it to be strange nor abnormal.

For she herself…*Why is this automata that looks like a cute girl in front of me here scaring me so much that I'm so scared of breathing* had been wondering about this too.

RyuZU showed a smile on a face, and took a step forward, saying,

"Oh—I guess it's AnchoR after all? It's been a while."

"Heh…? AnchoR? This girl?"

Naoto widened his eyes, tilting his head as he asked,

"I do remember AnchoR being in Tokyo, right? If it's according to Marie."

"I did hear the same as well, but now I do think that since it is information provided by Master Marie, it was a mistake to accept it fully…but AnchoR, what is with that mask? I have to say that it is too distasteful, to say the least."

RyuZU asked, but AnchoR remained silent.

She did not show any reaction, merely showing a still stare through the mask.

Naoto tilted his head skeptically.

…This is?

The 4th machine of the Initial-Y series, 'Trishula' AnchoR.

Since RyuZU herself did testify this, surely this girl was AnchoR. There was no way RyuZU would make a mistake in identifying those of the same series.

However, Naoto wondered.

—Something seems amiss.

The girl in front of him was just standing there.

Even after having removed his headphones, Naoto could not be certain as to whether she was activated, or whether there was a silencer function that resulted in ‘silence’.

—There was no friction, no conflict, no excess. There was no noise, no distortion, just a natural flow like water dripping.

Naoto had never heard such a calm running sound before. Like RyuZU, there was no doubt this was an otherworldly, absolutely intricate automata.

But, Naoto wondered.

—Something’s definitely amiss.

He took a step back, gritted his teeth as he glared at the girl in front of him. There was no doubt; he had a firm belief.

The girl in front of him was quiet, too quiet.

But the mask, the noise ringing from it, contorted and ruined everything.

For example, it was like a concert aria performed using a string, and then violently rupturing to a point of nearly wrecking the arena with violent sounds, contorting everything.

The dreadful amount of ‘exotic sounds’ shrouded the girl.

Again, RyuZU called out her name,

“AnchoR?”

“Threat level, Category Two’—request for change in ‘Power Reservoir’…acknowledged.”

The girl suddenly spoke up.

It was not a response. What came out from her mouth was something more terrifying and dangerous.

"—Begin difference loop, 3rd Shift."

The girl's appearance changed.

Her hair became long, her limbs became large, her eyes became red, and the whites on her became black.

The ring spinning above her head folded, the cube pendant on her chest transforming into a solid gear.

The angelic, innocent girl had transformed into a pure, devilish girl.

"Chrono Hook—beginning Imaginary Output from Perpetual Gear, emerge."

Naoto's ears captured the exceptionally loud contortion and grinding of the strange noise.

—It sounded like a lament.

The girl said these final words,

"—Absolute Mobility (Bloody Murder)—"

The next instance.

""—SCRAM!!""

Both Halter and Naoto screamed the same line, Halter using his gut feeling, and Naoto his insight.

RyuZU immediately executed this 'command' without asking the meaning behind those words, and she grabbed Naoto before leaping far back with breakneck speed. Halter, grabbing Marie, managed to jump away a tad later.

The girl in front of them raised her hands, the solid gear floating above her head transformed.

And immediately afterwards—

—The space exploded

There was no way to describe it other than simply an overwhelming 'something'. The things that should not be destroyed were destroyed, and the things which should be impossible to shred were shredded apart. That sound agitated Naoto's eardrums sharply.

And then, Naoto saw,

The space RyuZU and him were at had been 'liquidated'.

The alloy floor that could not be destroyed under any ordinary circumstances were completely obliterated without a trace.

"—Wha"

This is impossible. Marie was left speechless.

On the other hand, RyuZU narrowed her eyes as she stared at the crater-shaped hole on the the floor.

The topaz eyes were dull.

"AnchoR?"

RyuZU again called her name.

However, her eyes were filled with adamant will, and they were no longer those of someone treating a close person, the complete opposite of before.

"—I shall give you one chance. Do explain yourself prudently. Depending on your intentions of offending Master Naoto, even if you are my cute little sister—"

The emotion from that voice was frigid. RyuZu had completely lost all the warmth of humanity as she gradually became a robotic automata that was only focused on accomplishing its objectives.

With a monotonous voice, she declared,

"—I shall thoroughly destroy you until you cannot be repaired."

And as she said this, RyuZU's eyes turned red.

That was the sign of her activating the special function installed in her alone.

But Naoto interrupted her as he yelled,

"Wait a second, RyuZU! That girl's—she isn't functioning!"

RyuZU immediately answered without looking away,

"But we were just attacked."

"No, her body's moving, but her functions aren't working! She's broken—no, that's not the right way of putting it. Anyway, she's not working normally now!"

—Again, there was a sound.

The gears were distorted, twisted, and grounded. Naoto knew this sound, it was the 'cry' of the gears, desperately trying to fight back against the overwhelming power.

That's basically…and Naoto turned to look at AnchoR

"!!"

His eyes met the eyes behind the mask.

This isn't just a feeling, Naoto thought. He felt this way, he believed that was it; the eyes under the mask were clearly telling him this.

—I hate, this—

It was a hoarse yell that could not be reached out, lamenting that it could not be heard, yet it continued to let out a voice that could not form a sound.

—Sister, destroy AnchoR—

"Damn it."

After hearing her actually say such a thing, Naoto gritted his teeth and clenched his fists,

"—Missy, if I may ask, can you beat her?"

Halter whispered.

He never looked away from the girl in front of him when he asked this question, for he understood that anything action she took would lead directly to their deaths.

RyuZU too did not look away,

"…Under 'Mute Scream'—my chances of winning should be around 20%, I suppose."

This answer caused silence upon them.

RyuZU who could manipulate imaginary time, did single-handedly slice through a massive battalion of the latest cutting-edge heavy-armored automata in that instance, and yet she hinted 'basically no chance'.

After hearing this fact, all their faces were drained.

The words RyuZU said before appeared in their minds

—The 4th unit of the Initial-Y series, 'trishula' AnchoR lies within there.

She has the strongest fighting mobility and weapons amongst all the automatas

However, RyuZU stepped forward, and said,

“There is no problem. In the worst case scenario, I can at least buy some time for Master Naoto to escape—”

“I refuse! Halter, to the right!”

Naoto yelled to cut off those words.

At the same time, the cube floating above AnchoR twisted again.

Halter, who was in combat mode, responded to Naoto’s voice and moved at increased speed as he carried Marie and jumped to the right.

At that instant, a certain thing cleaved away the space Halter was at.

The cube continued to twist and spin.

“RyuZU, to the back! Halter, to the left!”

Halter followed Naoto’s instruction as he dodged the intangible, silent attacks that came at him, muttering in his own heart.

(He can read the attacks—!? What did he ‘hear’ to do such a thing?)

He could not understand, but this was currently the only way for him to survive. He had to subject his life to something he could not understand, and that was truly terrifying to him. At this point, Halter was going through such an arduous moment.

s—After several attacks, it seemed AnchoR decided that it was meaningless to do so.

This time, the cube itself spun, and stopped.

At that instance, ‘a massive sword’ appeared in AnchoR’s hand, and Marie shrieked the moment she saw it.

“Are you kidding me!? She can manipulate space—!?”

This was an overly large broadsword unfitting of that petite body. It was not contained using gear technology, but simply appeared from nothing before it was held in AnchoR's hand.

That was the super technology the current gear technology could not replicate.

—Is this AnchoR's 'unique function'?

Marie widened her eyes.

The once frozen thought process of hers thawed, and accelerated

—RyuZu can't use 'Mute Scream' now.

There was no way the enemy will give RyuZU the chance to activate it. No, even if she did activate it, even if she could beat AnchoR at this point, she would just use all up the power in the spring.

And they would be cornered

To compound the situation, even Marie could hear the sounds of the enemies Naoto had just sensed, the approaching enemies.

There were 42 foot soldiers and 18 military automata. There was no way for them to win head on if RyuZU was unable to move.

Then—then, what should they do?

"RyuZU! Halter! Onto the floor!"

"Halter! Throw me out!"

AnchoR was holding the sword that appeared from nothingness, and spun it like a spinning top as she closed in on RyuZU with the speed of a cannonball.

RyuZU dodged this attack at the last moment, and the black scythes grazed the floor.

Also, Marie, who was thrown into the air by Halter, swung the Coil Spear,

And fired a grenade.

That grenade landed right on AnchoR, who was in the midst of swinging the sword.

There was an explosion of boom and flames.

—But, Marie thought. She had firm belief AnchoR was unscathed.

With the flames and smoke roaming around, she could not see AnchoR, and neither could AnchoR see her surroundings.

"!!"

Halter attacked.

The double gears in his entire body, from the ankles to the knees, waist, body, shoulders, arms, accelerated instantly.

His prosthetics were at maximum output as he swung his arm at supersonic power—however,

Poof

With an overly soft sound, AnchoR grabbed his fist with a single hand.

Halter curled his lips as he groaned,

"…Oi oi, what's with those Shock Removers of yours, Missy?"

You're hurting me, Halter smiled. He opened the fist at his chest, and threw the explosive in it at AnchoR's feet.

It was targeted at AnchoR. No, at the floor.

It exploded.

RyuZU's scythe, Marie's shot, and the metal jet directive explosive—

The alloy floor that was over 20cm thick could not take the aforementioned damages, and a crack was formed on it, causing AnchoR to tumble over immediately.

The explosion lifted the cover up, and the alloy shrapnel collapsed diagonally—

After confirming this sight, Marie held the gun grip tightly.

Without letting out a sound, Marie asked as she hung from the anchor wire that was fired to the ceiling,

(So is this how it is, Naoto—!?)

This was the lowest level of the city—and further below it was a disguised dock.

In that case, if they were to cause a collapse here, it would be the inside of the hollow planet core further below. What awaited below would be a completely frozen core, an actual outer space.

RyuZU was able to escape with Naoto, and Halter was able to escape using the anchor wire as he went back to reclaim Marie.

AnchoR, the only one left, should be falling to the depths of hell itself along with the floor!

—However.

AnchoR steadied herself while the floor collapsed.

The stare under the mask were pursuing the sight of Halter, who was rolled up with the wire and headed towards Marie.

The cube again spun, and the giant broadsword in AnchoR's hand vanished.

And then, what replaced it was a sharp, contorted pillar with drill-shaped tips.

The triple drill attached to it spun violently, and upon hearing that sound, Naoto panted,

"Wah, that's a really bad sound!"

He never heard of such a sound before, but knew what the motion was. If he remembered from what was written in the textbook, this motion was—Naoto yelled upwards,

"Marie!! What's the phenomenon caused by Triple Resonance Movement!?"

Naoto's words caused Marie to gasp,

"—A Resonance Cannon!? That size!?"

You gotta be kidding me she panted.

Typically, it was a massive weapon of destruction that was normally equipped on heavy-armed helicopters, or on a Destroyer. It was not something that could be handled by a single unit, whether in terms of power or energy used.

However, that thing had enough power to destroy a skyscraper in one hit—

And that cannon was aimed at Halter, and also to Marie.

There was no time to dodge.

Once AnchoR squeezed the trigger, both of them would be vaporized.

Unable to avoid the premonition of death, a gut-wrenching chill ran rampant within them.

—Got to, got to think of something!

Her mind was spinning blankly. She could not sort her thoughts. She could not derive an answer. Her intellect had betrayed her. She felt impotent in the face of her limit.

There was no time.

Ahh, but I can get RyuZU and Naoto to escape at this moment, right?

Such a thought appeared in a corner of Marie's mind.

At that moment—

"—RyuZU! 'Stop' that—!"

Naoto yelled.

""What!?""

Upon hearing that yell, Marie and Halter doubted their ears.

But RyuZU obeyed Naoto's words and swung the black scythe.

The scythe slithered sharply as it hit the cannon AnchoR had raised. The cannon body itself then let out a shrill explosion, and the scythe that was stabbed in was caught in the explosion, breaking into pieces.

During this time, Halter managed to grab and hug Marie successfully.

AnchoR threw aside the wrecked cannon, and turned her eyes to RyuZU and Naoto.

The cube again spun.

But before then, RyuZU spun in the air once and swung down the remaining scythe. It extended greatly, seemingly ready to hit the still

AnchoR, and hooked the latter's leg from the blind spot, removing the footing.

But RyuZU, who attacked at that time, lost her balance in mid-air.

"Naoto!? RyuZU!?"

Marie's yell pierced through the rubble.

Craddling Naoto, RyuZU tried to adjust herself, but,

AnchoR again aimed for this opening.

Her body still unbalanced, she hung on from the rubble, pulled out a new weapon from nothingness, and aimed the cannon at the duo.

…Watch out!

Marie was about to scream such a warning, before before she could do so, Naoto yelled.

"RyuZU— 'below'!"

In response to those words, RyuZU gave up on balancing herself.

She swung the scythe, and hit the rubble.

The recoil caused the duo to fall faster than before, and AnchoR's attacking grazed past them. They were able to avoid the direct hit.

But they were unable to negate the shock completely, and RyuZU was in a tailspin as she fell together with the rubble.

Right in front of them was—

"Halter! Fire the anchor wire at them!"

"I can't, Milady! I can't reach them!"

Marie immediately yelled, only to be followed by Halter's denial.

RyuZU hugged Naoto as she continued to fall into the basement that was far below.

And both their bodies quickly vanished amidst the rubble.

Over there—was the bottom of the planet nobody could return from after falling in.

It was a point where not even RyuZU could do anything.

Even this legendary automata, which could manipulate time and far overshadowed current technology even after 1000 years, was without a flight function.

AnchoR barely held onto the side of the collapsed hole as she remained there.

And she watched the duo fall into the abyss far below.

The face was covered by the mask, and no expression could be seen.

However, the cube spinning above the head,

…The spinning wavered, even if a little.

Chapter 3 - 23:20 Avenger

—He fell.

For an instance, Marie was still unable to accept this fact. Halter was spinning the gears in his prosthetics at full speed, lifting his owner up as he escaped from the scene.

As she watched the rapidly departing bottom of hell, Marie yelled,

"!! Wait!"

There was no waiting.

"Wait—please stop!"

She did not stop.

The latest generation of cyborg was at full throttle, and the violently acceleration caused breathing difficulty as Marie slammed her fists on Halter's back in rhythm, one after the other, "Let me go back, you idiot! We got to help those two…!!"

"It's useless."

In response to the cold, monotonous reply, Marie was at a loss of words.

"That's a very deep basement. Leaving aside me with the cyborg parts and that Missy down there, it's not an environment where humans can survive. You know that, don't you?"

—Of course I do.

Falling into the deep basement was equivalent to falling into space.

That was the hollow floating in the middle of space; the empty void left only with the core after the mantle was released. Of course, it was not an environment where humans could survive.

However,

"Are you saying we're going to abandon them!?"

Marie clenched her fists as she yelled.

"That guy—Naoto got involved in all these because of me! I was the one who brough him here!"

"Didn't I say that it's useless already, Milady?"

Halter's response was utterly cold.

And with a dry voice, he concluded,

"Naoto Miura's dead."

"!!"

Marie gritted her teeth hard.

Driven by her intense emotions, her teeth were gnashed loudly. Drive by an impulse to wreck something at that instance, the emotions struck her along with with the intertwined guts within her.

"Ahh—ahh…"

The insides of her eyes were heating up.

She wondered, *Maybe it'll feel so enjoyable if I can yell and cry out like this.*

…But that would be useless. She could not do that.

Marie herself was the one who brought him to this this place; Marie herself was the one who got him involved in these incidents. She could not bring herself to act out such shameless behavior of being depressed over such an outcome, or to lament. She definitely would not allow herself to do this.

Marie Bell Breguet did not have such a right.

She should have been mentally prepared for this. She brought that boy, who only had a unique skill, and nary any formal training, to such a terrible place.

Thus, this was the result to be expected. It was just the end that would some day arrive.

"However…!'

But even so.

That was surely something that was to happen sometime.

And yet, so suddenly—

"—"

Halter again grabbed the silently sobbing girl, steadying her, and leaped.

The body, jumping off with enough strength to crush the footings, easily got up to dozens of meters.

Continuing with the triangle jump, he rose up the space.

On that way up,

"—Oh, what luck."

Halter found a little tunnel on the wall, and grabbed the edge firmly.

He made sure Marie on his shoulders did not collide with the edges, and continued in a scaling manner.

Once he reached the end, he effortlessly kicked aside the sealed shutter, poked his face out, and found that it was a vertical drain.

It was approximately 30m in diameter, and he was unable to determine the depth above and below them. The walls had a spiral-shaped path on them.

Halter stopped here for the time being, and put Marie down.

They could not head back down their original path.

Since their intrusion was already made aware, surely there would be a tight security perimeter set in this facility.

But even so, they could not waste time in such a place.

For they should be under pursuit in this situation.

RyuZU, who could fight off against them, was no longer around.

If they were to be attacked by AnchoR again, there was no way they could put up any resistance.

"…Have you calmed down somewhat, Milady?"

Halter spoke up as he faced the girl who remained seated silently on the pathway.

"The current situation…you'll understand it without me saying anything, right? Now that those two are gone, our fighting strength now's greatly reduced. It's really bad."

"…"

Marie did not answer.

Halter sighed, and continued.

"Even if there's a little hope, we need to do something about it. We can't do anything if we're going to stop here. Anyway, we have to escape to the surface no matter what."

"—…"

"You probably revealed everything about the factory's layout Naoto has revealed, but we can't possibly go back there no, you know? Doesn't this mean we'll have to look for another exit? Now then, there's a need to sneak through the enemy's security net in when we don't have any tricks to pull off. Isn't this fun, hey?"

"You hear me?"

Halter rubbed his bald head, and he narrowed his eyes sharply.

"Right now, we need to pass through the 'army' security without any prior intel. If we're not careful, we're going to get pursued by the heavy-armed MA and a Initial-Y series. We're going to be in danger if you're going to continue being like baggage."

"—Don't look down on me!"

Marie raised her face as she glared at Halter. Her moist eyes were already swollen, and Halter did not say anything.

Marie was heaving her shoulders greatly, and she took a deep breath.

Before exhaling it all out.

"…This is most likely the transit duct for materials."

She stared at the altitude meter wrapped around her wrist, and continued on,

"If they are to create that thing secretly, they can't use the transport routes on the surface. They probably sent all the spare parts created in the surface factories as they were to the underground, and assemble them in this level that's not supposed to exist."

"In other words, this vertical drain is linked to a factory on the surface?"

"No, it'll be very inefficient if every factory is to create a transport towards the underground. There has to be a place to gather all the materials…I'm guessing that place itself is linked to many factories instead."

"Hm…in that case, there's a way to get out of here."

Halter said as he looked up the drain, rubbing his chin,

"Those pursuers looking for us…will probably look for another hour or so before giving up, right? I guess it'll take about an hour for them to use the lifts and elevators to the surface just to report. We'll continue to climb quickly up this drain, and we can hide in the byway if we want to …well, we'll definitely be able to escape anyway."

…*The problem is* Halter looked down at the girl at his feet.

Marie's physical strength.

This drain appeared at minimum to be at least 70km tall. But even so, it was possible to scale this within 2 hours. It would not be impossible for

Halter's cyborg body alone, but the problem would be whether Marie's body could endure this overly intense continual motion.

She was a little more trained as compared to girls her age—but she was ultimately a human made of raw flesh and flood.

That was why,

"Don't mind me."

Marie said as she looked back at Halter's eyes.

Skeptical, Halter asked,

"Can you endure it?"

"We don't have any other options, right? If you find me a nuisance, leave me behind."

"That's not what I mean, of course?"

A disappointed Halter immediately frowned the moment he heard the lines of a pawn.

Marie slowly got to her feet, and Halter saw that her limbs were quivering slightly. She was not physically tired, it was a mental issue—she was mentally damaged

Naoto Miura's death had caused a great shock to Marie Bell Breguet's heart.

…It was all in vain.

That was what her voice and face showed, and Halter sighed.

The genius, idealist, somewhat arrogant, competitive girl—was just a girl after all.

This girl still could not accept the fact that someone close to her died.

However—there was no room for her to accept this current situation.

Halter sternly said,

"You fine, Marie? Hear me out."

"…"

"There's no time to rest. I'm going all out to climb this, so don't let go no matter what. Speak up only when you can't handle it, and other than that, shut up."

Marie gasped, and wordlessly nodded.

Alright, Halter too nodded back.

"—Now then, let's go."

●

"—Ah."

Marie seemingly rolled off Halter's back as she tumbled onto the path floor.

She could no longer move a single finger—correction, it was moving, but it was not due to her own will. Her limbs were already limp, and unable to stop. Her muscles were completely **frozen solid.**

—Halter spent 1 hour, 58 minutes and 34 seconds climbing up this vertical drain that was approximately 72km long.

During this time, Halter had been running and jumping up the vertical walls, and Marie continued to cling onto Halter's back, never letting go in any way. They ascended vertical through the use of the prosthetics that were beyond normal specifications, accelerating and decelerating—Marie continued to endure this ordeal of a process that would have caused a normal human body to lose consciousness.

But she was at her limit.

…She was unable to stand up.

Marie was utterly breathless as she crawled on the ground. Her lungs were crushed, her heart was seemingly broken apart as she shrieked. Her entire body was covered in annoyingly sticky sweat, and tears appeared on her eyes that were devoid of sadness. Her vision flickered, and she felt nauseous. Her bones were aching, seemingly snapped—but even so.

And so,

"Ah…haa—"

Or rather, so what about that?

"You can't stand, Milady?"

Halter knelt down beside her head as he said this calmly.

—Who does this bastard think he's talking to?

Marie wanted to curse out, but failed to do so. She could only let out a little groan like a frog being crushed.

Her blurred, teary vision showed Halter's icy face. A human body could not match a cyborg's, btut Marie could not help but feel anger.

He's seeing me like this, yet why does he—

But because of that anger, she managed to regain some strength.

She tried her best to control her trembling hand, and starting from her pinky, folded each finger tightly into a fist. She slammed the floor, regained her strength, bent her knees, ans straightened her waist.

She took a breath, and gritted her teeth.

—I'm still moving

She was still alive, unlike him, who was already dead.

"Don't force yourself."

*Alright,*Halter carried Marie up, and she was left breathless. She was furious and embarrassed to be treated like a child again, her blood boiling.

Though she wanted to say something, Marie kept her mouth shut. In fact, it was impossible for her to stand up and walk in this state.

"Anyway, let's get out of here. Be the baggage for a little while."

Marie nodded in response to Halter's words, and closed her eyes.

She began to think of what would happen later.

In other words, she recalled what happened till this point.

—Naoto Miura's dead.

She bit her lips. She did not have the instincts he had, and could only gather all the information that appeared to her for understanding purposes.

What exactly was that gigantic weapon she saw at the lowest level? Surely it did not seem to be some decent thing itself. Even if she did not consider it to be violating a treaty, there was no place for it to be used. How could such a monstrous thing be used appropriately? It would simply destroy and sever everything. The ones who would use such a thing…terrorists?

I got involved in this.
Her chest felt tight. It was not that sort of a foolish thing. There was definitely no such terrorist group that could build such a massive thing at the lowest level of the city and ensure its secrecy. There was no way the group would be so well funded in finances, materials and manpower.

If such a thing was done right below their feet, which government would be so incompetent to not notice such a situation?

—Do you, of all people, have the right to call others incompetent?

Her eyes felt hot. Thus, the enemy had to be the 'military'—or at least a person of considerable standing in the 'military'. The enemy had already used a clock tower itself as spare parts, so in that case, one could consider that along with the 'military', the Mie parliament would also be enemies.

—That information's what you obtained from that Naoto you killed.

Her head was in pain. There was another detail; why was AnchoR at such a place? She was mocked by RyuZU, but there was no doubt in the intel that AnchoR was deported to Tokyo. Was she moved to Tokyo before being moved to Mie again? In that case, why Mie? If that was the unit the Kyoto 'military' had, would it not be appropriate to return it back to the original user? Such a huge dissonance would mean that it had something to do with that gigantic weapon. Surely this would be the crux?

—No matter what you do now, he won't return.

Marie could no longer bear this as she rolled off Halter's shoulder.

She crawled on the floor, cuddling her knees like a fetus, but she was unable to endure the nauseousness that arose in her, and vomited,

"Uu, gguu, guueehhhh…!"

She vomited out onto the path a few times. There was no color of blood to be seen in the vast amount of vomit.

—Ahh, I didn't damage my internal organs. Marie thought. She really started to hate herself for being concerned with such trivial matters.

"…How terrible."

"Yeah. It's really terrible."

Halter repeated with a stoic voice,

"…I failed. Utterly."

"Yeah, you really failed terribly there."

Halter silently agreed.

He did not give any cheap consolation, and his tone was not appealing in any way, but she was thankful this time.

She affirmed,

"—Naoto's dead, right?"

"I guess? It's impossible to survive that fall from there."

Halter nodded mercilessly.

—It's all your fault.

"—Am I right!!?"

Marie lost herself in her fervent emotions as she slammed her fists onto the floor.

A sharp pain echoed even through her bones, but it did not matter. It was nothing much compared to the nauseating feeling of her innards being tumbled around.

Marie's eyes sharpened, and the emerald eyes were lit with a dim flame and she said,

"—This is quite the high price to pay."

"Of course. You might have to pluck the hairs out of your ass here."

In response to Halter's words, Marie nodded, and stood up.

They had to be quicker, even for just a second; they had something to do no matter what.

Oh, yes.

She was the one who got involved. She merely spent her free time and shook a tree, luring out a wild tiger. Because of this, he lost his life, so she had to bear responsibility herself. There was no time to show regret, and in such situation, she could not allow herself to be crushed by her guilt.

—I'll just enjoy myself with such a luxury once everything's done.

Marie wiped her dirty lips with the sleeves of her coat, and said,

"…AnchoR's supposedly moved to Tokyo, but she appeared in Mie; this definitely has to do with that weapon."

"Well, it's natural to think of it that way."

"In that case, there's definitely contact between Mie and Tokyo. At the very least, there's a person supporting Mie with enough authority to move an Initial-Y series unit that was moved into Tokyo."

"Also, don't forget that there's one person with the expertise to control that AnchoR."

Marie nodded.

RyuZU was shocked when AnchoR attacked; in other words, she did not think it was possible for such a thing to happen, or at the very least, that was what she believed. AnchoR was an automata who continued to remain sleeping in the basement of Kyoto.

"…Maybe somebody modified her, or took over control of her through an external device."

"That mask looked very weird. Well, no matter what I just said, there's a need to contact one of the five Enterprises just to make the technology in the mask.

Halter rubbed his chin, and continued,

"The Vachrons? Or the Patteks…Lunge seems a little little suspicious too. I heard that the Odemas are one of the cleaner ones, but I can't say that they're completely spotless."

"…No matter which once, it's something to talk about once we get back to the surface."

She let out a sigh.

"First, we need to hear what Tokyo has to say."

●

They got up to the surface, and it was almost dawn.

What they saw at the entrance was the abandoned factory that was complete in facilities, but could no longer be used. They quickly exited the industrial complex, and soon arrived at the Ring Rail station.

They rode on the train, and after a little shaking, arrived at the streets of Ise.

The prior night, Marie's group arrived at the Grid with the 'Platform' through the 'Cylinder Train'.

But they still could not return to Japan.

Marie simply patted the dust off her clothes, and along with Halter, got off the Ring Rail, wandering deep into the bustling shopping streets in front of the station.

It was around dawn, and the shops on the streets still had their shutters lowered, but there were people walking to and fro. Unlike the bustling streets at the edge of the Industrial Complex, the streets here were full of life.

After taking some turns, both of them arrived at an old building, an empty hotel.

It seemed like a shop for drunk customers to spend the night. They were skeptical as to whether it was really in business, but after entering, found the facilities to be unexpectedly tidy.

They booked a single room, entered it, and Marie immediately walked to the communicator that was installed.

She picked the phone receiver, and dialed the phone number for the Breguet's secret lines.

With the help of this Breguets' secret line, she managed to make contact with Tokyo.

And a few seconds into the call, she heard the voice from the other side,

"—Ohh, Professor Marie, it has been a while since you contacted us."

In the face of the cordial voice, Marie was a little hesitant as she responded.

"It has been a while."

"…Did something happen?"

"Well…yes, actually. A lot of things happened—really."

Marie blurted, seemingly wanting to vent, and lowered her eyes.

If she were to take this head on, she would definitely cry; suppressing this emotion with all she had, she turned to the receiver, and continued with a calm,

“Please excuse me. I don’t have the time for relaxation now…I shall ask you directly now. Do you know where the Initial-Y series unit I asked you to investigate is located at now?”

“No. What do you imply, exactly?”

“We met it, just a few hours ago.”

“What!?”

The other party raised the voice, seemingly surprised,

“Are you in Kyoto?”

“No. Right now, I’m in Grid Mie.”

“Mie?”

“There…was an anonymous provision of intel. We intruded and entered the bottom of the city to confirm it, and we found something really terrifying.”

And then, Marie began explaining about the massive weapon she found in the level that should not exist.

She existed the appearance and capabilities her eyes could at least determine, and also AnchoR, who seemed to be deployed there for security reasons, and the combat ability that was beyond logical thinking. She also explained her observations that the Mie parliament and the ‘military’ were the enemies, and the shadows of the Enterprises behind all these—

Once Marie explained everything, the other party groaned,

"…How did such a thing happen?"

"There is something I want to confirm. There was no doubt that the Initial-Y series unit was sent to Tokyo, right?"

"…The 'military' did move her from Kyoto to Tokyo. There were records of it, and also eyewitnesses accounts. She was taken out from a container, so this can be confirmed."

"Then, I guess she was sent from Tokyo to Mie?"

"I guess…there's no way it doesn't have anything to do with that weapon."

"That's what I think too. Mie and Tokyo are heavily linked in this incident. Do you mind checking for me who was the one in charge of the Initial-Y series unit being moved into Tokyo?"

"That in-charge may be in collusion with the collaborators from Mie, huh?"

"Yes."

"Give me a little time. How about that?"

"I'll leave it to you."

Marie intended to hang up, but the other party hurriedly added in,

"And another thing—I'm not certain, but something strange may be happen in Tokyo."

"…"

"The Tokyo 'military' seemed to have gathered their forces together. As you know, Tokyo runs on a federal system place with multiple Grids in it. It seems many Core Towers and Clock Towers are unmanned because they gathered most of their forces in one place."

That is. Marie groaned.

The Core Towers and Clock Towers that were left empty, the suspicious movements of the ‘military'; she did not like it, but she inadvertently thought about the incident at Kyoto that happened some time back.

That incident where Kyoto was to be purged along with its 20 million citizens…

The party on the other side of the phone seemed to be pondering the cause and effect, and said,

“Leaving aside history, Kyoto was simply just a sightseeing city, so that can’t be the reason in this case. If the Tokyo area is to all fall together, it’ll affect the entire Asian region.”

“So the question here is how to let it fall, huh? But that’s…”

In an instance, her vision went dark,

Marie gripped the receiver firmly in her hand, and hissed,

“According to this logic, Kyoto too should not be allowed to fall.”

In summation, this was an issue of logic and binding principles.

Why did the humans, organizations, ideals that said ‘yes’ to killing 20 million conclude so firmly that it would affect the entire Asian region? This would surely be disadvantageous to them, but why did they make such a decision? In other words, *There had to be another reason that allowed them to do that.*

There was only silence to Marie’s words,

“…I suppose. Yes, it happened beside.”

“Anyway, please follow through with what I requested. I’ll continue to gather some intel here. If we investigate this any further, we’ll definitely find many suspicious things about this.”

Understood. The other party said, and repeated what was requested.

"Anyway, please be careful, Professor Marie. The enemy is a terrifying opponent."

"…Yes, thank you very much."

After a brief reply, Marie finally hung up the phone.

She bitterly let out a sigh, and feeling vexed, she could no longer control her emotions as she kicked out with all her might, ostensibly wanting to send the bed beside her flying.

"Serious! They're all like this!"

"Don't lose your temper, Milady."

Halter's reproaching voice could be heard from behind.

Marie looked back over her shoulder, and glared at the face of the big man seated on the chair,

"Yeah yeah, so what if I'm throwing a tantrum? What? You want to be my sandbag here?"

"I'll gladly do that if that'll get you to calm down."

Halter said tauntingly as he curled his lips.

At that instant, Marie raised her eyebrows—and quickly shook her head.

I'm like an idiot, she muttered.

"Well, fine. I've decided what I want to do. Let's go."

"…Goodness, we just escaped from danger there, didn't we? At least think about me."

Halter continued in a rebuking manner, and Marie impatiently snorted,

"Whatever, I can do this by myself."

"That's not it. Get it already, Milady. Calm down a little, no, are you even calmed down? Are you doing all this out of desperation?"

"—It's nothing. Got any questions?"

With a stoic expression, Marie continued,

"This life was gotten back through Naoto. With RyuZU's capabilities, she might be able to return from such a massive depth. If that happens—I guess I'll be killed by her."

She shivered as she hugged her shoulders tightly.

"This life's almost at its limit now, so I should use this effectively. I have to do everything I want to do before RyuZU kills me."

With a serious look, Halter heard these words.

He frowned, and seemed like he wanted to chime in, but did not say anything.

He merely let out a sigh, and nodded back.

"Got it, Milady. You can do whatever you want to do, but as a professional, I'll advise you to go to sleep now. Your life will be used up, but you want to do your best under the best conditions possible, right?"

"…"

"Take a shower, drink some sweet cocoa, and have a nice little nap. Regain your strength, clear your head, and beat up any guys you dislike as you want to."

"…"

"That should be more logical here, right?'

"…You're right. It's true, just as you said."

Marie accepted those logical words heartily as she nodded honestly. Once he was sure she was going to shower, Halter exited the room.

He bought some cocoa and sandwich at the nearest shop, and quickly returned to the room.

The flowing water in the shower continued to ring.

He sat at the chair, waiting for Marie to appear, and suddenly thought, *Maybe this is a suicide scene here.* The instant he thought of it, he chuckled.

No. There's no way for that. Marie herself would definitely not do such a thing.

And in seemingly confirmation, the sound of the dryer blowing the hair could be heard, and Marie appeared.

She was simply dressed in a bathrobe, walking over to him with the water dripping onto the floor. As he faced this gloomy Marie, he wordlessly handed over the cocoas and sandwich.

Thanks. Marie weakly muttered as she stuffed it all int her mouth. She continued to eat silently, and silently snuggled into the bed.

Halter moved the bed, taking the window side. He looked at the sight of the defenseless, sleeping girl, and suddenly, he spoke up hesitantly,

"Hey, Marie, as an adult's duty, I got something to say."

"…What?"

"You're a kid. You're just a little girl. That's what you said before yourself."

"…So, what?"

"Even if a girl's going to cry like a little girl, nobody will say anything about it?"

Marie did not answer.

A long silence passed, and just when Halter was wondering if she did fall asleep like this, he finally heard a somber reply,

"—I'll say, even if nobody will say it, I'll say it. I definitely won't allow it. If I'm going to succumb to my tears here, I—*I'll becoming nothing."*

Marie did not nudge or squirm her body. Her voice was flat and calm, not showing any falter.

Halter did not do anything.

However, he silently pondered.

He knew that Marie Bell Breguet's talent was not omnipotent.

This genius girl became the youngest Meister in history, and surely, if anyone were to be asked this, that would be the image they had of her. She was smart, and could do anything…but that was not the case.

The reason why she was a genius was because she was absolutely harsh on herself—it was too difficult to understand, so her normal talents were hailed as 'genius', and she was said to have the ultimate talent of them all.

She was wise.

She was tenacious.

She was kind.

In other words, she carried out her ideals through her body and mind; from Halter's perspective, it was akin to a fanatical level of faith.

An ordinary person would give up at a dead end, but for this girl, it would be the best starting point for her to get riled up; her engines would run to the point of accelerating past the limit, a destructive will to improve.

She had an indomitable spirit of self-denial, of being harsh to others, but harsher to herself.

—That was the basis of Marie Bell Breguet.

That was why this girl would not crumble. For she knew that if she did, she would become one of those useless untitled individuals. That was what she was most terrified of, and thus why she could not pamper herself. She decided that she was to live this way, and thus, it was understandable why she would become Marie Bell Breguet.

If she were to compromise—it would mean death for her.

Halter let out a deep sigh, and shook his head,

"Alright—where are you going to start a ruckus once you get up? Let's think about it first, talk it out even if we don't have recommendations."

"…You understand very well that I have no intention of giving up."

Yeah. Halter nodded.

Marie's soft voice was filled with a dangerous atmosphere as she continued,

"I want to take down the leader. We're gunning for that head of his."

●

"—Damn it!!"

Morikatsu Muroi dialed the communicator in annoyance.

He was the Prefectural governor of Grid Mie. Having finished all the arranged public duties on this night, he hurriedly finished dinner with his family in a hurry, and locked himself in the study.

Normally, it would be a habit of his to enjoy a late drink with his massive wife, but on this night alone, he did not have such a luxury.

Ever since he took up the role of Prefectural governor, days passed by like warm water. He simply had to settle his daily routine work. It was an ordinary, boring job that would make anyone unenthusiastic.

He however was satisfied with this. He did have his own ideals burning back when he was young, but having become a middle-aged man, and now entering his late years he could only laugh bitterly at his old childish naivete.

In the end, he was simply a cog that could be replaced in society; on the other hand, it was a must.

He simply continued to work, get his pay, scolded his daughter a little, but got hated in turn, and also chided by his wife.

—*This is fine enough.* He thought.

He did not need anything like change. The outcome was that anyone who searched for such a thing did not get it.

And because of this, what happened on this day should not happen.

It seemed there were intruders at the bottom level of the city. That was the most classified area, and furthermore, the report was that the culprits escaped.

Once he received the report in the morning, he showed anger, a rarity at that. He was still feeling displeased when he had diner, and that caused his wife and daughter to feel displeased too.

…He would have to apologize to them later.

He wondered exactly how he would get back on his wife's good side for some time as he spun the dial.

Soon after, he was on the line,

“—It’s me.”

“_”

“…Eh, it’s about this morning. What exactly is the outcome? You did say before that its secrecy’s completely assured.”

“_”
“That’s not it. As long as we see no evil and hear no evil here anything here, your lives and ours will not be threatened. Didn’t we make such a deal here? Are you renegading on what we agreed on?”

“_”

“Threaten? I hope you’re ot joking here. Didn’t I ask you guys already? Please don’t betray us now. Yes, yes, I’ll try to investigate what happened on your side, but hatred and ideals alone aren’t going to feed you.”

“_”

“Alright, please hurry and give us a conclusion here. It has been 30 years since then. It can’t be helped that things are a little slow, but even so, we shouldn’t finish this off like this—this goes for both of us.”

After saying this, the line was cut.

Muroi took a deep sigh, and put the receiver back.

He wiped his forehead that was seeping out sweat before he knew it, and slumped into the study’s chair

…30 years.

Muroi recalled the days that had passed, and sighed bitterly.

Till that point, his work revolved around nothing but Mie, and it had always been going on well. Even though they might be some major, minor troubles, he was able to handle them all.

It was not an impressive job. It was simply a job where he ignored the dangers near him, or the bomb that may blow up along with Mie itself one day.

But the now interrupted daily life was an unbearable theme for him.

Whether it was the intruders who brought him much pain in the gut, or 'those guys' who allowed them in so easily.

To him, all of these incidents were what he could not endure.

Why, why would every single person not keep their mouths shut and keep quiet?

"…Shit."

To drown his bitter, awful feeling, Muroi wanted to gulp down some strong alcohol. He gulped down some Whiskey, and wondered if it was time to turn in for the night.

He simply had to apologize to his wife the following day.

He rubbed his temples, trying to relax, and stood up.

At that moment.

The collar of his shirt was grabbed, and he was dragged back to the chair.

His heart raced.

There was a soft cloth stuffed into his mouth just when he was able to shriek. He continued to squirm desperately, but his body had something wrapped around it; duct tape. The sticky, sturdy tape tied Muroi firmly to the chair.

During this time, the captors remained speechless. However, he understood what they were trying to convey.

—Quiet.

—Or else.

Unable to fight back against such violent wills, cold sweat trickled down him.

It was not a prank. There were some people with malicious intents who invaded his study.

For a while, he was unable to believe that fact.

This was the official residence entrusted to the Prefectural governor.

It was not some classified facility, but there were often security guards(or rather, invigilators) stationed here. It was not a place that could be easily entered. Muroi himself did not notice anyone enter this room at all from the moment he entered the room till the phone call ended.

The reality however was that he was tied up.

He was wrapped from shoulders to feet in rounds, and the culprit who overpowered him slowly approached him from the front.

It was a tall man, a hulking man dressed in black, rubber suit, giving an overwhelming presence of one who dealt with violent situations.

The man hissed,

“We’re going to take out that thing stuffing your mouth now. If you want your limbs intact, don’t say anything unnecessary.”

Muroi’s shoulders shivered, and he nodded.

Once the cloth was taken out of his mouth, he was gasping for breath frantically.

He assumed the interrogation would begin just like this, but the man reached a hand out for the back of the chair, and spun it around nonchalantly.

"!!"

Stunned, he widened his eyes.

Right behind Morikatsu Muroi was a girl of tender age.

She was dressed in in a black rubber suit, and the slender, line-like figure was well defined. However, that itself did not give off a feeble impression.

The blond hair could still be seen in the darkness. The adamant emerald-like eyes glittered, giving off the atmosphere of boiling magma.

And so, Morikatsu Muroi recognized this girl's face,

"Ma-Marie Bell Breguet…you're alive!?"

Supposedly dead 3 weeks ago was the Princess of the Breguets, or a girl with a completely similar face. The baton attached at the waist swung at him without a beat.

Bam, a blunt sound could be heard.

He felt an exploding pain in his solar plexus, and let out a little moan, but it did not become a full blown groan. For the first time, he learned that to yell out loud would require him to have the opportunity to do so.

The tip of the baton easily pressed at his throat that was gasping in large breaths.

"—Who said you could talk?"

She spoke coldly with a frivolous girl's voice.

Upon hearing uninterested sounding voice, Muroi yelled in anger,

"Y-you bastards, d-do you think things will end just like this!?"

And he got a hit from the baton as response.

Mercilessly beaten, sparks fluttered in front of his eyes.

And while Muroi was unable to voice out and nearly knocked out, the girl spoke flatly,

“We’ll just spill it out for that dull-witted brain juice to understand. I’m not making a request to you. I’m ordering you here. You and I are not equal.”

“…S-stop messing with me!”

His face utterly dyed red and black due to fury, Muroi said,

“I-I’m the Prefectural governor of Mie! I will not forgive this insolence!”

“Oh sure.”

The girl nodded, and lifted her eyes slightly as she continued,

“Go down and get the wife. I guess I’ll show you how serious I am right now here. Women are fair play too.”

“Don’t do it!”

Muroi shrieked,

“Please! Leave my wife and daughter alone! I’ll answer any question!”

“I really wish you showed such an attitude right from the beginning.”

The cold voice caused Muroi to be utterly terrified.

The emotions in the emerald eyes were inscrutable . *It’s like the eyes of a praying mantis*, Muroi wondered. They were sharp, and devoid of emotion, but there was an inexplicable, intense will hidden with them.

The mantis, having taken the form of a girl, continued on,

“When you speak up, answer ‘yes’. Answer all the questions truthfully, and think of it for the sake of those useless organisms like you, don’t force me to do them in one by one.”

Muroi shivered, and nodded.

This girl did not think about his own circumstances. If he showed nary a little hesitance, she might literally carry out the threat—that was the intent that was conveyed.

“Now then, let’s begin from the most basic of problems.”

The girl sat on the office desk, and folded her legs leisurely.

She asked,

“Now then, looking at your surprised reaction, I suppose you don’t know that I’m still alive, right?”

“…I-I-I thought, you’re already dead…”

“Halter, hang him.”

Ugh. Muroi’s collar was lifted by the tremendous strength, and he was left breathless.

He was hanging in the air, and he continued to struggle with his neck bearing his weight. The girl coldly told him,

“You answered me the wrong way here. You are suppose to say ‘yes’.”

Muroi’s neck was released, and he coughed profusely.

His shoulders were quivering in fear, and with tears in his eyes, he apologized,

“Y-y…yes. M-my apologies…”

“It really is difficult training to train a stupid dog here.”

The girl curled her lips, and said,

“Next question. Do you know of the weapon that’s secretly built at the lowest level of the city?”

“Yes, I do.”

"That it also is in violation of the International Treaty with regards to massive weapons?"

"Yes…I-I never heard of the specifics, but I did hear it before?"

"Oh? Nice cooperation."

The girl raised an eyebrow, and smirked,

"So such a dangerous thing is happening right under your own feet, and you dare say that you're not sure of the specifics? How useless are you, exactly? Do you think I'm a fool who'll believe that!?"

"I-it's true! All that is for them to deal with themselves!"

"Deal? You're not the highest authority in this Grid Mie? In that case, the conspiracy that's plotted here should be done with you as the head."

"I-I'm just a representative here…!"

Still panting, Muroi said,

"Right now, the Mie parliament's the same too. We're just running the daily routine work of the city, and we've agreed with them not to interfere with them."

"Stop with that sleep talk already. You said that the ones making that weapon is just a one-sided deal on the military part, but aren't you just letting them do what they want?"

"…Y-yes, it's as you say."

"Is there a reason why you have to keep your mouths shut for their sake?"

"Th-that's…because our parliament got threatened by the 'military'…"

"Stop with that bad lie.

With an expression below freezing point, the girl glared down at Muroi, and said,

“There is definitely no way a part of the city’s taken away because of the threat of military might. Mie—or at least the parliament you’re part of, were probably helping the military enthusiastically for a long time.”

“Th-that is.”

“What I am not certain of here, is why did you do that. At first, I thought it would be for money and power, but there are no suspicions about the parliament’s accounts. Maybe the money is going to your side. As part of the deal, you probably got something back in return. However, the books showed nothing of such sort—it really is an unnatural relationship here, huh?”

“…”

“Explain.”

Muroi remained silent, not answering.

The girl let out a sigh, and pointed her chin at the man standing behind Muroi.

“Penalty. Kill one person.”

“Stop, don’t!!!”

Muroi frantically yelled.

The man leisurely pulled a knife from his waist, and turned to ask the girl,

“Which one do I kill?”

“Which one indeed…?”

While asking this, the girl tilted her cute face, and smiled at Muroi,

“Your choice then—your wife or you daughter? Which one do you want us to kill?”

“Please, stop it, please…!”

Muroi soggy face was covered in tears and snort, and he yelled in anguish,.

The girl merely looked down at him coldly,

“Did you not say the wrong answer there? You must have been gravely mistaken to think that I’ll continue to coddle and educate you.”

“B-both sides here coexist by sharing our lots…!”

He slumped his neck weakly, and continued to eke out his voice,

“Isn’t it because there’s a massive weapon here!? If-if the fact that they are in this Mie is discovered, we’ll be in danger too. Be-because of this, we’re providing protection for them…”

“…I do not get what you mean.”

The girl chided, and frowned.

“Do you mind explaining so that I can understand? Or not?”

“Th-they…aren’t Mie’s ‘military’…”

“…What do you mean?”

The girl frowned further.

His breathing erratic due to fear and the impacts he took, Muroi blurted,

“They’re the ‘military’ from Grid Shiga, which got purged 30 years ago…!”

●

It was a story which happened before Marie was born.

There was a sudden mass scale fatal malfunction that occurred in Grid Shiga, and due to the dire situation, the government back then quickly passed the Special Disasters Counteract Law. They forcefully carried out a Purge without waiting for the 'Guild' to be dispatched.

Of course, that was a major issue by itself that caused the cabinet to be dissolved. After the investigations that occurred afterwards however, the outcome was that 'if they were to delay any longer, it would have affected the Western Japanese Grids.

Because of that result, there were critical voices stating that currently, it might have been a decisive, unfettered counteract without fear for the losses, rather than it being a reluctant decision of much distress.

However,

"…That was all a lie."

Morikatsu Muroi's trembling voice denied that history.

"Back then, there was research on electromagnetic technology done in Grid Shiga. It was a large scale, national project…and there were almost 10,000 of the Technical Forces gathered there."

"Electromagnetic technology…!"

Marie's face became ominous as she said this. That technology was used as a contemporary technology in the old era, but in this modern world that was completely driven by gears, —

"Yes, it violated the international treaty. After that, the massive electromagnetic fields formed from the experiments leaked out, causing the city functions to break down. The government decided to eliminate all of that before the 'Guild' that got dispatched would find out about such a thing…that's the truth of the purge."

The expression vanished from Marie's face.

Her emerald eyes were the only think flickering, staring at the Prefectural governor's face.

"All the documents related to the purge were prepared, and all sorts of preparations were already completely. As long as the Chief Cabinet Secretary made the signature, anything could be purged. This includes the evacuation of the citizens, and the document stated that most of them were able to escape safely. They were taken in by, this place, Mie."

"…"

"Thus, most of them are technicians who were abandoned but managed to survive, and by taking advantage of the excuse of being 'refugees', they lived in Mie. Everything was done quickly and quietly behind the scenes."

While saying this, he lifted his head. His face, covered with wrinkles, was completely damp, and he was sweating profusely. The black eyes gave a strange glint as they stared at Marie,

"…12 years. That was how long it took for them to take control of the city."

"Why? Was there a need for such a thing?"

With a deep voice, Marie asked,

"They carried out illegal research on the country's orders, and were silenced because matters were revealed. Everything's fine till this point. In that case, why didn't you reveal this truth?"

"…Because in that case, Mie will be the next one to go down, you know?"

Muroi took a deep sigh, and shook his head,

"Shiga was sunk just to hide the truth, so how can you possibly conclude that…after finding that they're still alive, the government can't possibly let Mie sink?"

"Because…you can't possible force a purge because of such a retarded reason, right? And Shiga just got purged too."

In other words, cities were part of the land. Current technology alone would not allow them to develop cities and rebuild them, so purging would mean losing the land. They decided to sink Shiga to hide the fact that she violated the treaty, and that was clearly because everything was too late. If they were to continue purging cities, there would naturally be interrogative questions coming from all the foreign countries.

In response to Marie's words, he curled his lips,

"Fair enough. But I would say 'don't you mess around with us'. To us, who just saw Shiga fall at the closest possible place, and to them, who went through abandonment, you expect us to believe in the sanity of those crazy guys, the government, that they'll risk the lives of themselves and their families—are you really saying that?"

"…"

Marie could not answer.

Muroi's face was contorted, and he excitedly smiled,

"Back then, I was just an aide to a congressman. Occasionally, I would interact with their leaders, and I quickly understood the situation. If any of them were to find out about this, Mie would be sunk. Before that happened, I felt that there had to be 'a certain something' we could use to negotiate with the government no matter what."

"…That's the massive weapon underground?"

Muroi nodded.

"I'm not too sure of the details, but they're seeking a tangible 'power', that even if the government decides to purge the city and deploys the 'military' to fight us, we have a counter force that could fight against them and send them back."

After hearing these words, Marie glared sternly back at Muroi,

“So because of that, you sacrificed the Clock Tower in Mie?”

“The remains of Shiga alone would not be enough material…or so we heard, and we decided that it was something that had to be done.”

With a pale face, he concluded.

Marie narrowed her eyes, and asked,

“As a counter balance?”

That’s how it is. Muroi eked out these words with much difficulty.

“In fact, it used to be effective. Their existences were discovered by the government many years ago, but they basically had control of Mie, and had a powerful military force, so in any case, both sides struck a secret deal. The fighting strength’s undoubted, and the existence of that weapon, created from the purged Shiga, is clear evidence that the government once carried out an illegal purge on Shiga itself.”

Thus, they kept it till this day, and never used it.

While Muroi complained so passionately, Marie wordlessly lowered her head.

She understood. She knew it would not be easy to refute such a reason, but she could not believe them. They were simply driven by fear, and sought a stronger, definite, power.

However, that—

Marie said.

“You’re lying.”

“I’m serious!!”

Muroi hollered with such desperation on his face.

Marie stared intently at this face, and slowly asked,

“Since you said so, now tell me. Why’s that weapon in standby phase?”

“…What?”

Stunned, Muroi widened his eyes.

Thinking that this reaction was unexpected, Marie continued,

“We went down to look at that weapon for ourselves. That weapon was readied to the point that it can be activated at will. If you don’t intend to actually use it, there’s no need to prepare that much.”

“…”

Muroi went silent. It was not an answer of refusal, and neither was it silence because a ie was exposed. He merely widened his eyes in shock, his wide shoulders quivering greatly.

“…I see. So that’s how it is!”

He suddenly lowered his shoulders weakly. While Marie and Halter watched on in surprise, he took a long breath, and shook his head weakly.

“It’s over, there’s nothing…”

“…I hope that you don’t become the only one understanding what’s going on yourself, but you don’t have any intention of explaining?”

After hearing Marie’s question, Muroi let out a laugh from his throat.

Mie’s Prefectural governor slowly lifted his head and stared right at Marie. His face was full of fear, white and quivering, but the lips were curled in a mocking manner,

“Haa…looks like you don’t know anything. You barged into someone’s house, yapped always so arrogantly ‘yeah’ like that, but you’re just a haughty little Princess, huh?”

“!!”

In response to his slander, Marie raised an eyebrow.

Halter, standing behind Muroi, reached beyond the latter’s shoulder and grabbed the collar, whispering,

“Hey, don’t get cocky here. If you speak that way.”

“Shut up!!!”

Muroi bellowed. He glared back and forth between Marie and Halter with such aggression that Halter inadvertently let go.

“Do you still not understand!? That weapon was originally not to be used because it was intended as a deterrence. t’s just a guarantee for equal negotiations to avoid us being purged here! Looking at how it’s going to come alive, even an idiot can understand what just happened!!”

He paused.

“—There’s a breakdown in negotiations! The government has abandoned us! So those guys, the Shiga ‘military’, decided to fight against them, you know? Don’t forget that it’s all your fault here, Marie Bell Breguet!!”

Marie frowned hard, unable to understand this sudden lashing from him. On the other side, Halter gasped, seemingly understanding the intent behind the words,

“Hah! The punk here looks like he understands, huh? This is the result of you guys stopping Kyoto from being purged, and revealed all the information! Can you imagine how much loss the government and ‘military’ took here, how much of the International Society’s trust in them was lost!?”

“!!”

“To those guys, there’s a need for such a thing. To define the meanings of their existences, they need an ‘enemy’!!”

“!!!”

At that moment, everything in Marie’s head was linked together.

The Tokyo ‘military’ focused their forces, all for the sake of fighting against the Mie—former Shiga ‘military’ that would activate the gigantic weapon. The government had known of its existence till this point, but pretended not to see anything, so why was it that they decided to crush them at this point?

The only cause would be because—of the foiled purge attempt in Kyoto.

They left 20 million people to their demise as they planned to sink Kyoto. After that, because of an anonymous (Marie) tip off, the incident was bared completely to the entire world.

In the end, that damaged the country’s credibility, and they lost the trust of the citizens, causing distrust in the Enterprises. How exactly were they supposed to swiftly regain them?

It was simple—and anyone’s eyes would be able to see this clearly. They just needed to create an ‘opponent’. Yes, for example, it would be suitable to exterminate a rebel force that was violating the treaty and building a massive weapon.

“Do you understand now!? It’s all your fault!!”

His body, tied up, was wriggling with the chair as he hollered,

“You’re the one who revealed all that information, right!? You wanted to play the role of a hero!? You’re being the times here, shitty brat! All you did is just a prank that increased the chaos in the world!”

“!!”

“Thanks to all the unnecessary things you did, the government’s cornered here! We’re the bad guys now, and they’re the good guys! This is the scenario that’s formed! Thanks to you!!”

“…”

Marie could not answer. Her already white face was turning pale like paper, and she bit her lips together.

Sneering at her face at this point, the Prefectural governor snort,

“But those guys doesn’t seem to realize, what sort of memories they…we, lived over the past 30 years.”

He curled his lips, and continued,

“We were always so terrified, when would the government sniff them out, and when will they begin the purge…it has been ongoing for 30 years. We were always tortured by such despair and the fear we can’t shake off. Is the creation of such a trump merely meant to be used as a threat?”

Marie was able to understand the meaning behind these words.

—The massive weapon she saw at the lowest level of Mie.

If that sort of thing was to run riot, how much devastation would it cause. Even if the Tokyo ilitary was to gather and fight it seriously, there was no way it would be a one-sided wipeout.

“…!”

Marie stopped her panting, and bit her lips.

This man in front of him probably did not know of such details. On the other hand, he was so familiar and so confident. The design of that weapon, the terror and tenacity of the Shiga technicians who built that thing, were definitely not simple matters at all.

Smiling, Muroi said,

“We had to make a choice to survive. You understand that, self-proclaimed genius!? They’ll use this scenario planned by the government to fight it head on and crush it. History is written by the winners. They’ll crush any enemy that obstructs them without mercy, and those guys will be deemed evil while we’re justice.”

He then continued on with a dry voice,

“How much devastation will be caused in the process? Maybe one or two Grids may end up sinking, I don’t know. Now then, whose fault do you think that is?”

Marie did not answer. She could not answer. Shocked by the tremendous impact, she widened her eyes, her limbs shaking. She gulped her saliva, and her throat croaked.

“—YOU!”

Muroi yelled, his voice filled with such brutal hatred. The face was contorted with such fury and malice, and his expression that was staring at Marie was filled with vengeance.

“IT’S ALL ON YOU! IF YOU HAD DIED SILENTLY AND OBEDIENTLY HERE—NONE OF THIS WOULD HAVE HAPPENED, YOU SHITTY BRAT!!!”

●

—Without knowing.

The moment Marie noticed it, she was walking down a street she did not know of.

It was a street she had no impression of, and she passed through the gaps between the buildings. There was no crowd, and they were far from the buzz; the dim lights outside the could not reach her in this place.

Why did I walk to such a place here? Marie wondered.

Halter too followed her with a similar speed.

Marie’s shoulders were heavy, her footsteps slow. She did not want to look back, and was too lazy to speak up; she merely let out a long sigh.

Her memories were interrupted midway through the interrogation, and she could no longer remember what she did thereafter. Seeing Halter remain silent, it seemed they managed to deal with it appropriately.

"…"

The operation was a success.

—She abducted the Prefectural governor of Mie. That objective was completed very well. As for what was happening in this district, and what would happen later on, those that wanted to know would probably know about it all already.

However, she was not delighted in the slightest. At this point, she could be said to be—dejected.

"—"

Marie stopped.

If she wanted to achieve something, logically, a paradox would occur.

If the clock was to spin anti-clockwise, the resistance caused would affect the entire structure, and fail as a result.

Yes, she knew at least that if it was to simply favor the kind, society would not be able to run. Even so, till this point, she did all she could, and yearned to be a person who could stand proudly with her head held as high.

—And yet, it ended up in such a situation.

She saved Kyoto, revealed the atrocities, got too cocky, lost completely, and Naoto died.

And at this point, her reward was that Tokyo and Mie would end up in a state of war.

—She could not leave it alone.

That was the conclusion Marie naturally derived, but at the same time, she had doubts.

—What should I do here?

She did what she believed to be correct, and ended up with such a situation. Marie could not even think of looking for an excuse; it was all because of her, and thus, she had to bear responsibility for it. What should she do, what sort of responsibility, and how was she to bear it all? How did matters unfold to such an extent, and what exactly did she—

"Tell me, what shall I do…"

A weak voice rang,

—Rain began to fall.

The little, warm drizzle that looked to be drifting away quickly became a torrential downpour splattering upon Marie. She did not avoid it in the slightest possible way, and remained where she was.

"—You don't have to do anything."

Halter said,

"It's just some painless, harmless words to you, right? That Prefectural governor's just defending himself. If we trace it back to the original source, the government that caused Shiga to fall in the first place should be the culprit this time."

"I know…that much at least."

It was the government that carried out illegal research in Shiga, and it was the government that tried to cover up their misdeeds and carried out the purge. The Shiga refugees were the ones who carried out their form of justice, and it was illogical for Mie to view these as reasons and build the weapon while violating the International Treaty. Saving Kyoto

itself was undoubtedly not a wrong here, and the information she divulged after that was not some karma hitting back at her.

Thus, to Marie Bell Breguet, the responsibility she has over this situation—was none?

—That was not the case.

“But I can’t leave it alone.”

In the midst of such a situation, Marie’s actions were not malicious in any way, but she could not escape from the involvement. How could she pretend that she did not see such a thing?

“That isn’t the problem here.”

Halter denied her with a calm voice,

“The situation is out of hand here. It was already beyond what you could do as a clockwork technician.”

“But that’s…ugh!”

“Now then, what will you do? Reveal the information? You can take the risk, but this will just force the government to act faster. It’s just an urban rumor without solid proof; they can say anything they want as an excuse. ‘The purge in Kyoto was for the same reason’, Those guys will calmly state this difficult decision, I guess.”

“So…!”

Marie turned back, and stared at Halter.

Halter took her stare head on without flinching, and spoke up,

“So, what do you want to do now? Are you going to stop it all in secrecy? How? The enemies are the government, the ‘militaries’ serving both sides, and the 5 Enterprises. What can you do right now?”

That tone was very calm, to a point one could call it gentle.

“Are you still not aware that you’re already dead? Also, if I have to say, you should be living an obedient life as a student in Kyoto right now until the social chatter calms now.”

“Tell me what I have to do then!!”

Marie yelled in agitation,

“Are you saying that I should quietly observe everything that happens afterwards as a bystander?”

“That’s an option.”

Halter let out a little sigh, and nodded,

“The government will use the ‘military’ and crush that weapon. If they are able to do so, they will at least get back the bare minimum amount of credibility. It’s not really a bad thing to quietly watch hopeless guys fight it out against those who had no other choice but to fight.”

“Are you serious?”

In response to Marie’s question, Halter shrugged,

“I’m not good at making jokes.”

“You saw it too, right? The underground weapon. Look at it. Do you think the Tokyo ‘military’ itself would be enough to defeat it? We also got to consider AnchoR here. With that weapon and AnchoR attacking at the same time, you think they can win?”

“Probably impossible.”

Halter honestly nodded,

“And even so, what is the problem here? Is it that important of an issue whether the government wins or loses here? Like what that Prefectural governor said, maybe the scenario will play out against them—but so what about that? There’s no reason for us to be troubled by that.

Marie shouted,

"A lot of people will die!"

"Of course."

"If that weapon's going rampant out there, it will not end that easily! Whether they win or lose here, the city will be fatally devastated!"

"I guess."

"In that case—are we going to lose more lives than how it was supposed to be in Kyoto?"

"You're absolutely right here. No matter how many times I do say so, it's the result of idiots doing idiotic things here. It's not something a powerless brat has to take responsibility for and start panicking like crazy."

Marie was left speechless, and stumbled back.

She was unable to understand Halter's words—no, actually, she could understand it. At the very least, she was able to recognize that the logic behind it was the right one. Even if she did not do anything, whatever happened in the future was not Marie's responsibility. That was what he was trying to get at.

"Don't kid around with me!"

Marie gritted her teeth as she growled, the wounded pride completely completely. *We're at this stage already, and you're trying to take away my responsibility here!?*

Halter took a little breath, his expression seemingly easing as he shook his head,

"I'm not joking around here. I'm just plainly stating the cold hard facts here, Milady. If you really can't accept this, well…that can do. I'll follow your decision."

And then, Halter asked,

“What do we do now?”

Marie did not answer.

Nothing mattered no matter what she did, and she understood best that she herself was unable to do anything. She understood her capabilities and limitations very well…in her current state, there was nothing she could do to interfere.

“_”

She naturally got down to her knees.

She knelt there dejected. The rainwater gathered on the ground dampened her underwear so much it was disgusting, but it did not matter to her.

The important things in her heart seemed to be crushed, and she was unable to stand up.

She bit her lips hard.

She understood what this weakness was, and understood that no matter how much she persevered and remained proud as she did the right things, there were still thngs she could not do.

But even so—she had a feeling that if she was together with Naoto, they would be able to overcome anything. Having let him die at this point, this diminutive her could not do anything at this point.

“…No.”

Such thinking there was simply an excuse.

The water and mud splattered upon hear, and a numbing pain passed through her arms.

—Don’t be mistaken here.

What could she do even with him around? Did she think he was just a nice gimmick for any circumstances?"

She thought of the talent she could not understand as a magical miracle, and that turned out to be the outcome.

She could not give up, and she could not allow herself to die like this.

But she could not do anything. She could not change anything.

—Her thoughts were spinning blankly.

And the pouring rain got stronger.

There was no light, and visibility was really bad. Unable to endure the pattering raindrops, her body gradually got heavier.

And at this point, she just ended up unable to move forward.

"…Why?"

Why did it end up like this? Maybe it was as that rural Prefectural governor that said, that if she had just died quietly, perhaps things would have been better than they were at this moment.

They intended to sacrifice 20 million lives for the sake of their meaningless pride. Even after so much effort spent to save them, they intended to continue killing more people than that this time?

"What, is this…"

Marie was unable to understand.

—There was always someone dragging things down.

There were both right decisions and mistakes. Justice did not belong to any side, contorted easily by a little malice when without belief and sincerity. The only facts were the circumstances that benefited them, and the rest were all just lies.

—She did not doubt it at all. She had to be mentally prepared to understand that yes, that was how it was. Nothing would change even if she sighed, and till this point, she agreed that it waswas the world she lived in.

But in fact,

Ever since she was a child, she always thought,

That this world was unpleasant, so irritating.

Marie continued to pant as she looked up at the sky.

She could see the dimmed, narrow sky from between the gaps of the buildings.

The falling rain pelted on her face, sliding down her eyes as they flowed down her cheeks.

The words that were always in her heart were so difficult to express so simply, and they carelessly slip out,

"…What value is there in this world?"

It was because of such an idea that she realized her own arrogance.

Was it not ridiculous that a mere human would question the value of the world? That would be the issue she knew very well of, where many people would cry together, laugh together, solve issues together little by little and improve.

—Go eat shit.

She was already sick of it all. She was sick of those pretty sounding words

The Clockwork Planet was patched all over simply to extend its lifespan—but were the people living on it not already failures themselves?

Even if they were to somehow overhaul this world itself, what could they do?

It had been approximately 1000 years since that miracle, when the already dead and frozen planet was forced to continue on.

But in the end, such a situation occurred. How much had humanity actually progressed exactly?

She was completely worn out, her clenched fists loosened.

—At this moment.

Pak.

A soft sound rang as the manhole beside her opened.

Appearing there was a hole large enough for a person to pass through.

Appearing from there was an unimpressive looking boy who suddenly poked his head out, growling,

“Wow, this damned rain…what now? We got away from the drain water for the rain water?”

"Will it not be better to think of it as something that can wash away filth? Also, if this rain is caused by the improper maintenance of the facility, the manager will have to bear responsibility for dirtying my clothes, and I wish to bury him alive."

"……."

That's a hallucination, right? She concluded.

It seemed Marie Bell Breguet's sanity was completely blown to a point where she could even see hallucinations, a delusion that should not exist, and her dejection got severe as a result.

In a corner of her vision, the ever familiar boy and girl slowly climbed out of the manhole, and that had to be a hallucination itself. This was a delusion that should not happen. It was probably the rain's fault.

…For it certainly was very strange.

"—Seriously, it's hot here! If it's going to rain, at least lower the temperature a little! Seriously, what's with this, this place called Mie!?"

"Master Naoto, given that it is raining this much, you must have been disappointed that you are unable to see me in my swimwear on this precious Sunday—"

"Ahh!!! That too damn it!!! When it rains, it pours here!! Ahh, but now…hm? Ah, it's Marie. Dammit, don't wanna involve myself with her."

"Master Naoto, have you finally learned the high level skill called learning from your own mistakes?

……And furthermore, she had auditory hallucinations. *There has to be a limit to how much you can be dejected here! It's so unbecoming of you that you're having the trash end sinking into such a nice delusion here. Even if you're given up the Breguets name, you didn't abandon your own pride. No matter how sad or bitter you are, you have to keep going forward, and even if you lost—wait.*

She gasped.

Her hands on the floor, she exerted strength in her feet. She relaxed her joints, and with her muscles acting as a spring, her body, heavy due to the rainwater absorbed, leaped and spun!

With all her might, she sent a sure-kill spinning kick at the hallucination that was not supposed to exist—

"—Burragh!?"

"Master Naoto—!? Seeing your insolence here, Master Marie, I suppose you do not want your life anymore, so since you wish to be sliced up, allow me to—"

"Wait, wait! Both of you, calm down already! Especially the Princess!"

"ARRRR!!!"

Marie grabbed Naoto, who almost fainted, and yelled out a strange sound.

The deflated feeling of all her efforts being for naught became a flood of emotions that knocked her senses off, but her hands clearly felt the idiot she was grabbing, and at least convinced her this was the case.

"—Since you're still alive, shouldn't you have hurried up and show your face?"

"U-ugh—y-you gotta be kidding me! I just came back."

"Shut up with your answer!"

“Master Naoto, please wait. I shall now utterly dissect that wild dog here.”

“I told you guys to calm down already!”

—It seemed that this was not a nice, one-sided delusion.

●

Let us rewind the clock to 20 hours back.

When he woke up, Naoto wondered, *why am I in such a place?*

His vision was dim. It seemed he was in an exceptionally large space, and the ceiling height from this point was not merely a few hundred meters. It felt as if he was outdoors…eh, outdoors?

His memories linked together.

After battling AnchoR, he was embraced tightly by RyuZU, and fell into this deep, deep hole.

The moment Naoto recalled this, a voice from above his head called him,

“Are you awake, Master Naoto?”

He tilted his neck slightly, and found RyuZU’s face close to him. At this moment, he finally realized his current predicament.

He was using RyuZU as a lap pillow.

Once he realized this, Naoto felt that it was a pity to just get up like this, and gently nodded before closing his eyes.

All his sense were focused at the bottom of the head, where the tenderness of the thighs were.

“I see that you are tired, so please listen to me as how you are now. Right now, we are outside the Mie city, in the basement far below. This place was originally the equivalent of space, and given your utterly

feeble body of flesh and blood, Master Naoto, you will die in the next few seconds—"

"Waaahhheeeyyy!!?"

Naoto got up in a panic.

No matter how reluctant he was to leave RyuZU's thighs, he could not pretend not to hear these words.

"Th-this is bad, got to hurry back before I die—huh, w-wait…? But it's been more than 10 seconds already, isn't it?"

Naoto pattered his body as he asked, and RyuZU nodded in response,

"—Yes, logically, that should be the case. For some reason however, it seems this stretch does contain an environment that allows humans to survive…how about you, Master Naoto? Did you give that command because you realized that fact?"

"Eh? It's nothing. I just found that there's still footing down below, so I thought that since there's another level below, it's fine to just fall down."

That's it. Naoto was about to say this, before he hushed up.

RyuZU, staring at his face, had lost all expression, and with this icy mask face, she spoke stoically,

"Master Naoto."

"…Yes."

"I found that though you are at the apex of humanity, Master Naoto, relatively speaking, you are the most intelligent in the world. Tragically however, in an objective viewpoint, I have determined that you are so foolish beyond hope."

"Eh, errm…"

"Please allow me to explain. This is a foothold remnant built more than 1000 years ago."

"Foothold remnant…?".

Naoto repeated blankly as he looked around.

He focused his attention as he observed the dim surroundings, and then, he realized this was a large web-shaped place linked to countless passages. Dilapidated, it was still sturdy.

For some reason, Naoto found it to resemble a construction site. Either that, or a ridiculously large, complex jungle gym.

RyuZU waited for Naoto's understanding, and continued,

"The Clockwork Planet was created using the mantle within the Earth as the original material. Of course, the conclusion is that there was a need for footing to excavate. At the same time, these footings were used as the structural frame when constructing the planet—**And they exist throughout the underground."**

"Eh, that's…"

"Currently, the planet is completed, and all the cities are running normally. This level is not protected by the Clockwork Planet's environmental controls."

"And you mean…?"

At first, Naoto assumed that it was to be expected that there was a footing far below the surface, and even determined that it was a place humans could survive at. In fact, this judgment was just due to a erred misunderstanding on Naoto's part—

Yes. RyuZU nodded, and said,

"To be blunt, you could have died. I suppose it can be said that you were lucky, and this should be due to the kind deeds I accumulate daily to a point where even an angel would feel sheepish by."

“GYYAAAHHH!!”

Realizing how much he was playing with fire back then, Naoto let out a scream.

Only at this point was he breaking out cold sweat, his heart pumping wildly.

And RyuZU stared coldly at a panicking Naoto, saying,

“Master Naoto, once we return home, be prepared to receive my strict education, including those not included in the curriculum. You may have an exceptional talent, but you still need the most basic of knowledge, or it will be extremely dangerous; this is what I determined.”

“Yes…I’m really sorry.”

Naoto lowered his head, grovelling as he apologized.

However—he tilted his head.

At the same time, he was skeptical. Why was this place an exception?

And the moment he asked RyuZU this,

“There is only one answer. There are people who came to repair this place, no?”

“Then who?”

“I do not know. It probably has to so with that hideous looking massive weapon, no?”

Hm. Naoto nodded.

Truly, they could not say that that strange thing and this underground phenomenon were not interconnected.

And the most important thing was that—this place looked new no matter how he looked at it.

It was dated, but it did not resemble something that was here since a thousand years ago. Furthermore, the place was not completely dark, or in other words, there was light. What was supposedly a place of pitch darkness was lit by the light gears, though it was really bright enough to see.

In other words, Naoto muttered,

"Somebody's maintaining this place, huh? Did they use the transport routes used to create that big weapon, or…well, I'm not really sure, but anyway—"

Naoto pricked his ears.

"Anyway, we got to get back to the surface."

Since there was someone maintaining this place, there should be an exit, and an elevator to return to the surface.

Then, Naoto picked up the next destination he should head to through his hearing.

"Over there. Looks rather far."

Naoto turned his head aside as he said this,

"There's the sound of machines running…and it sounds like there's someone there."

RyuZU nodded.

"Then let us go forth. Please hold my hand, Master Naoto."

Both of them held hands as they cautiously passed through the dilapidated, dim passageway.

They were not hampered in the pitch darkness at all thanks to Naoto's super senses and RyuZu's highly function sensors…but even so, if they were to miss their footing, they would really fall to the abyss.

Both of them walked on tentatively.

The path was winded and irregular, sometimes a steep slope down, followed by a gradual slope up.

But even so, they would not lose their way thanks to their sense of direction, and after proceeding forth for more than an hour, the path became wider like the twigs to the branches, and the state of repair was better than before.

Let's have a rest. Just when Naoto was about to say this.

Light shone into Naoto's surroundings, slightly off from where they were headed towards. Lots of light was shining from the ceiling, into the unfathomable depths.

"…What's that?"

He tilted his head skeptically. Looking at it, it seemed to be some massive structure. It did not seem to be something that was built at first, but that the constructs that had fallen here just so happened to land on the web-shaped paths…

Feeling puzzled, he pricked his ears, and immediately got an answer. That was—

"That's the city's…Core Tower, I should say?"

To be precise, those were the remnants.

Logically, it was not in operational at the moment. It seemed the most of the inside was hollowed out, and Naoto, pricking his ears, could basically feel the emptiness within it.

RyuZU, right beside him, tilted her little head as she said,

"Looking at the direction, I suppose it is the purged Grid Shiga, no? Looking at how it managed to stop at this height, I must say that it is rather light…though the city itself was already a hollow."

"A hollow?"

"In the past era, it was the area with the largest stretches of lakes in Japan. Yes, it is said that one-sixth of the land was filled with lakes, and the rest were mostly the rural countryside; a plain, peculiar location city here."

With his eyes half opened, Naoto stared at RyuZU,

"…Erm, you have any grudges against Shiga?"

"No? It is not personal. This is just what is stated in my records."

RyuZU denied with a blunt look, and continued,

"When the world was mechanized, Grid Japan was replicated into a water city in Western Japan. Most likely, the weather in Mie is so brutally humid due to this purge."

"Ah, speaking of which, I think Marie just said that too."

Naoto nodded, and looked over at RyuZU, who continued with her explanations.

"But anyway, you do know quite a lot here, RyuZU."

"Yes. Since you have forgotten, I shall regrettably introduce myself again for the umpteenth time. My maker is the one who designed this planet."

"Ah, I see."

No wonder she knows this so well, Naoto nodded.

"—"

"…Hm? What's the matter, RyuZU?"

Naoto noticed RyuZU being silent and staring at him, and he asked,

"Yes…it is regarding AnchoR."

RyuZU replied.

She faced Naoto directly, and stood on her toes as she lowered her head.

“Please accept my belated apologies. I am really sorry here.”

“Eh…? Wait, RyuZU. Why are you doing this out of a sudden?”

“I placed you in utmost peril, Master Naoto. My shallow thinking and my bungling little sister are grave losses that cannot be atoned for…but I still yearn for your forgiveness, Master Naoto.”

Dumbstruck, Naoto had his mouth ajar.

RyuZU continued to have her head lowered, her face nary to be seen. Once he saw her quivering shoulders and her fists clenching the skirt tightly, Naoto panicky said,

“Don’t do this. Lift your face up, RyuZU.”

“…”

“I say, I’m not angry at all. I’m not thinking too hard about it.”

“…But…”

“—I’m really not, RyuZU. Anyway, isn’t it pitiful to say that she’s bungling? AnchoR on her part did say that she hope you’ll be able to stop her.”

Naoto sounded so relaxed as he said this, not minding at all.

But after hearing this line, RyuZU lifted her face. Her beautiful golden eyes widened as she said,

“—You are able to hear AnchoR’s voice?”

“Hm? Ahh, well, sorta. If it’s not my imagination.”

Naoto nodded, and RyuZU relaxed her expression somewhat.

"To be honest, I am very surprised. Amongst us sisters, that girl is the one with the most difficulty expressing herself."

"Hm? I don't think that's the case."

"No. For you, Master Naoto, so isolated from humanity and one whose communication skills are a question mark by itself, it really is a miraculous accomplishment to do this."

"Please don't say that or I'm gonna cry."

Sorry for being a weirdo here Naoto shivered, and RyuZU frowned as she continued,

"However, if that is not AnchoR's will, that really is…?"

"Ah…hm, I guess that mask's the strange thing. That mask's the only thing giving off a really bad 'sound'. AnchoR's 'sound' seemed to be overpowered by it."

After hearing Naoto's words, RyuZU lowered her eyes.

Her arms were folded in front of her, ostensibly enduring as she clenched her fists, and curtly replied,

"—Unforgivable."

"Yeah, AnchoR's innocent here. The ones responsible are definitely those bad guys who put that on her. Once we find those culprits, we're going to demand apologies and compensation until they cry."

"Of course."

RyuZU said this with an angelic smile,

"First, we shall shred them from the toes. Once they fully understand to the bone how they should not be born in the first place, we shall etch their names in the annuls of humanity and publicly execute them when they are filled with pain and despair."

"…And please regulate those grotesque scenes, 'kay?"

Naoto tentatively added this line, and RyuZU nodded as she smiled at him; it was a vague smile that could have been yes or no."

"…Well, whatever, let's move on for now."

Both of them then continued to walk and rest from time to time, and finally arrived at their destination.

On first glance, it was a 'town' akin to a ruin.

The residences were built on the waste accumulated on the footings, and though shoddy in structure, they were neat homes. The tower right in the middle reached out far above, and it seemed to extend to the ceiling, the bottom of Mie city.

—However, there was no one around. The signs showed that there were at least thousands of people who once lived here, but either house was littered with dust, looking dilapidated.

After looking through a few houses, RyuZU said,

"Based on a logical deduction, I would assume that the survivors of the Grid Shiga purge once lived here, no?"

"They're still living after a purge…is that, such a thing possible?"

"I suppose they are rather fortunate, or maybe extremely unfortunate."

RyuZU lamented as she let out a sigh,

"…But there are actually people who built such a town and lived on. It seems all of humanity are exceptionally hardy as compared to what I would think."

"Well, they say home is where we make it, but I don't want to deliberately make my bed here…"

Naoto chimed in as he pricked his ears.

Amidst this abandoned slum, he clearly heard the voice of a single human.

Once he found a vague idea of where that voice was, he asked RyuZU,

“What do we do, RyuZU?”

“Let us hear him out. It can be said that a person is a failure of humanity if he ends up living alone like this, and there is no worth in conversing. However, perhaps we may get a clue as to the uncouths who manipulated AnchoR. Also, he is alone, so we can definitely handle him.”

“…Hm, anyway, try being a little friendlier?”

After hearing RyuZU hint at her actual intention, Naoto felt a chill up his spine as he said this.

They walked forth to the middle abandoned ‘town’, where the Central Tower was.

Soon after, they arrived at a little hut. It was no different from the other houses, a barrack made of scrap materials. However, there was no dust near the entrance, and there was the deep buzzing from a mini-generator at the back of the house. There was someone there.

Naoto carelessly knocked the door twice, thrice, and said,

“Erm, excuse me! I got something to ask here~”

And then, there was an immediate response from behind the door.

“…Who’s there? What are you here for?”

It was an exceptionally hoarse voice of an old man.

“We’re lost. We want to know how do we get back to the surface.”

“…”

After a long silence, the old man said,

"…The door's unlocked. You may come in."

Naoto and RyuZU exchanged looks, and decided to slowly open the door.

Once inside, they found that the room was as cramped as how it was on the outside.

The ceiling was low, and the lights dim. The shelves, probably made of scrap materials, filled the walls completely, and there were old books and papers stuffed all over it messily. Looking towards the side, they could see a simple kitchen and a little bed. This was a home adequate for one person.

In the middle of the room, under the lamp of light gears, was a large old man seated on a rocking chair.

His shoulders were wide, his bones large, and under the wilted skin, the refined muscles covered his body completely.

Both his messy, tangled hair and the little beard filling the profile of his chin were silvery white. The color however was reminiscent of one who went through much rather than one who was old and feeble.

He had his elbow pressing against the armrest as he supported his face, and the glittering, metallic eyes, were staring at Naoto and RyuZU, who entered the room.

He tapped at the closed, thick, hard cover book on his knees,

"…Who are you people? Why do you come here?"

"Ah, well actually, we accidentally, erm"

Naoto muttered vaguely, and RyuZU chimed in from the side,

"We fall from the bottom of the city, approximately 34,258m to this place."

"Yeah yeah, erm…I guess that's how it is? Then, we don't really know how to get back up there, damn it. It's all because of that land mine of a girl Marie, that plague goddess."

The old man stared at the duo skeptically, and slowly shook his head.

He let out a languid sigh, and told them,

"…There's no way to go back up."

"Ah, you can't think of a way then? You got to know that I'm now driven by a mission t save this girl called AnchoR, you know?"

"This is a place that was already purged, and everything's moved out. It's just left with me and a few production plants here. The elevator leading to the surface has stopped."

"Then try activating it again. Anyway, can you be a little faster, gramps? While we're dragging our feet here, AnchoR will—"

Naoto was suddenly left breathless. His vision went black, his feet unsteady. While supporting his collapsing body, RyuZU said,

"Master Naoto, there is air here, but the atmosphere is extremely thin. Even if you have graduated from humanity, and is currently an existence equal to God, you are still a human at this point, yet to evolve into a living entity of a higher dimension that can survive without oxygen. It is best for you to calm down to avoid dying."

"I-I'll really die?"

Utterly shocked, Naoto widened his eyes.

RyuZU gently caressed Naoto's pale face, and continued,

"…After your remedial, you were forced by Master Marie to Mie because of her self-insisting personal reasons, and so we invaded a military facility, fought AnchoR, fell more than 30,000m, and walked through thin air for prolonged time. Master Naoto, I am truly impressed

that your perverted desires, especially your devoted love for dolls, led you to perform beyond your limitations, but please have a little rest."

"…If you want him to rest, let him sleep on that bed."

The old man said.

RyuZU wordlessly stared at the old man, and nodded. She lifted Naoto's lifeless body to the bed in the corner of the room, and let Naoto lie down.

After seeing that Naoto was asleep, RyuZU again turned to the old man,

"Now then, please allow me to ask the questions in place of Master Naoto."

"…"

"I do not have any interest as to who are you, and what you are doing here. Master Naoto however has things he has to do, and I have a duty to fulfill all of Master Naoto's wishes to the best of my abilities. This place is not good for health either—"

While RyuZU muttered this stoically, the black scythes were revealed from the hem of her skirt.

The blades curled up like a snake eyeing its prey.

"Please provide us with information on how to get back to the surface. I shall get the answer through all my knowledge and abilities, even if it means causing you all the pain in the world."

"I see. So you're one of the Initial-Y series?"

—The scythes raced forth.

The black scythe blades were resting precisely at the old man's neck.

"You really think for your master's sake."

The old man let out a bitter smile, and sighed. Despite his face about to be sliced off, his eyes showed no signs of fear.

RyuZU asked,

“What exactly do you know?”

“It’s nothing weird. Basically, you survived after fighting ‘that’, and fell to this level, right? Also, you were unscathed—no automata other than those of your kind can do that.”

“…”

“I heard that the Princess of the Breguets put in quite the contribution to prevent Kyoto from being purged. Let me guess, you are the unit 1 she has, right?”

RyuZU did not answer, and her golden eyes narrowed warily.

“Since you know of such a recent thing, I suppose you are not a shut-in who thinks of himself as a hermit and failed in life.”

“It’s not off to say that about me. I am a failure after all.”

The man continued,

“The elevator leading to the surface is really stopped, but you just need to get some power in it to get it moving.”

“Then, please do this.”

RyuZU commanded.

While keeping his smile, the old man said,

“I shall do so, if you are willing to hear some words from an old man.”

●

“—And so that’s how we came back.”

Naoto concluded just like that.

The 4 of them returned to the room Marie and Halter rented in the empty hotel to avoid the rain, and exchanged information.

After hearing Naoto's words, Marie said blankly,

"In other words, you weren't thinking of dying back then…?"

"Eh? Thinking of dying? Me? Why?"

Naoto was dumbfounded, and Marie stammered,

"It's, nothing, just that, I thought you wanted to sacrifice yourself to cover us…"

"What are you saying?"

Naoto immediately denied it, and continued,

"I was just thinking of stopping AnchoR, that's all. Or rather, how can I possibly think of saving a foul-tempered girl like you here? Where was the flag set up? If I die, RyuZU will be sad, and I can't save AnchoR, so logically thinking, nobody will benefit here, right? Marie, are you…actually stupid?"

"_"

Earning Naoto's sympathetic looking eyes, Marie was trembling with rage.

"…Well, that makes sense."

Halter whispered, and upon hearing this, she turned around, asking him with a voice echoing from the depths of hell,

"Halter…are you telling me that you realized this a long time back…?"

"No, I didn't have solid proof back then, you know?"

Being glared at, Halter shook his head, and continued,

"In fact, it is undoubted that he would have died falling to the underground far below. However, it is also a fact that it's suspicious to think this kid would save you there, Milady."

"In that case, why—"

"Would you have listened to such words back then? Unless we actually proved that Naoto's still alive, such words would not even be considered as consolation. I thought that it would be adding fuel to the fire if I said that, so I chose to be silent…"

"_"

Marie went silent, and wondered,

There were a few doubts she could not get; for one, Halter was unexpectedly calm about Naoto's group falling down. Marie however felt that it was a natural mentality of a retired soldier who went through ample training and actual combat…

And so, she understood.

In other words, she was the only one toyed like a clown. Such despair, burden, tears, vomit, wounded hearts and repeated considerations over the current situations were all—just a foolish misunderstanding here, a silly one-man show.

—Right, let's kill them.

Marie decided this quietly.

There's no way I can salvage my wounded pride unless I bury all those related to this and pretend that nothing happened here…!

"You guys…"

Marie swayed as she stood up,

But Naoto ignored her as he laid out the map on the floor.

Then, he said,

"Anyway, leaving that aside, let's go to Tokyo."

"—Eh?"

Naoto's words caused Marie to stop.

Marie had yet to say what information she had on her side, including the truth about Grid Shiga's puge, the conflict between Mie and Tokyo, and that they were on the brink of battle.

But why—once he noticed Marie's skeptical look, Naoto answered,

"Hm? Did I say something weird there? AnchoR's protecting that massive weapon, and she was supposed to be in Tokyo, right? In that case, that weapon's destination is Tokyo if it moves—that's what I think here. Am I wrong?"

"Yes…you're right."

Marie looked somewhat dumbfounded, and then she signed,

She was progressively used to such a thing; he would always come up with a deduction himself, completely ignoring minor details in the evidences or the situation.

"…Then, what are you going to do in Tokyo?"

"Eh? What else? Of course I'm going to save AnchoR. Anyone who can say no after hearing such a cute automata 'pleading must be sick in the head of something. That's impossible."

…Is this guy an idiot after all?

Marie rubbed her temples that were struck with a sharp pain, and said,

"…You guys just came back from the underground, so I'm not sure if you know this. That weapon's intending to attack Tokyo, you know?"

“Well, it is a weapon after all? I guess it is used for that sort of purpose, so?”

“So—seriously, you.”

“But I say, AnchoR’s ‘pleading’ me for help here, you know? Why don’t we just stop that massive weapon while we’re at it. Save AnchoR, beat massive weapon, and everything will end nicely, you know? We’ll get that mastermind or final boss in the meantime, since something like that will probably be in Tokyo. Can’t we just catch them all and deal with them?

“…”

Marie let out a deep sigh, and scowled.

And Halter interrupted from the side,

“…I’ll say, Naoto. It sounds easy, but it’s a question of how to do that. Do we have a way to stop that weapon?”

“That’s why we have to think about how to deal with that.”

Naoto merely said that nonchalantly.

Halter stroked his chin, and stoically stated,

“Tokyo is currently gathering the ‘military’, and Mie is activating the gigantic weapon. My guess is that Mie will strike first. It’s not a bad idea to remain on standby in Tokyo, but once those guys fight in Tokyo, Tokyo itself will get involved, you no?”

Naoto then immediately answered without hesitation,

“Then, let’s think of a way that won’t cause Tokyo to collapse.”

“In that case, we’re not going to be facing just the gigantic weapon. The Tokyo ‘military’ will become our enemies.”

“Those guys won’t our guys in the first place. We’ll just make use of them.”

“In that case, this time—”

“Ehh shut up already!!! We’ll just think of how to deal with them all, alright!!?”

Agitated, Naoto yelled.

He vented his thoughts at Halter and Marie,

“Stop yapping about logic here and there; we’re aiming for the same thing anyway! No matter who the hell says such logical thing, there’s no way I want to give up on AnchoR no matter what, whatever! If anyone tries to stop me, I’m going to chop him up even if he’s the president!”

“—”

Marie could not answer, and Naoto continued to emphasize,

“So? What are you going to do!? If you’re going to just yap ‘I can’t do it’ and run with your tails behind you, now that’s just what an idiot will do! Hah!?”

His taunting tone caused Marie to be agitated,

And before she knew it, she snapped back,

“—Don’t you look down on me!”

Her emerald eyes were lit with flame, and she let out such bombastic words.

Naoto and Marie faced off against each other, eyes staring at each other.

“Who do you think you’re talking to? Who do you think I am!?”

“Who cares about you now, you idiot!? ‘Right now’, you’re just a party pooper of a foul-tempered girl howling like a defeated dog!”

Neither side was willing to back down.

Sparks were flying between the gray eyes and emerald eyes.

“You don’t have a detailed plan, so stop coming up with those deluded one-sided wishes of yours!”

“You can’t do anything now~. If that’s called a detailed plan, I don’t need such a thing!”

“Eh!? Who are you calling useless now! Don’t decide that on your own!”

“Oh really? To me, you’ve been looking for such an excuse all this time.”

In her fury, Marie reached her hands out, and grabbed Naoto by the chest,

“_”

She was about to lash out, only to swallow her words back.

From up close, she stared at the gray eyes.

Clearly, disappointment could be felt form his expression, and Marie felt her body sizzle in agitation.

The shame caused her shoulders to tremble, the intense fury burning her inner heart.

She was fine with being scolded for being arrogant. It was a refreshing feeling to be arguing with someone else. She did not have to use honorifics when addressing others. All the volleying insults were par for the course.

But despite all of that,

There's no way I want this guy pitying me here—!!

At that instance.

Like a lightning flash splitting through the night sky, her memories awoke.

"I—!"

She was once like that, facing off against him, and she said those words.

Back then, she said the one line of unwavering belief, yet she accidentally forgot about it.

That was the one prideful line that defined Marie Bell Breguet's life.

Her emerald eyes sparkling, Marie shouted,

"—I'm a girl who thinks that there's nothing that is impossible!!"

*Ahh,*Naoto merely let out a smirk.

"—That's it. That's how you should be. Or else you're just an ordinary foul-tempered girl."

Marie suddenly burst out laughing.

"Huhu…haha, ahahahaha!!"

Naoto in front of Marie, Halter and RyuZU stared back blankly, but she did not mind.

How can that be possible.

I only remembered such an obvious thing at this moment.

Marie said,

"Let's confirm it—you're a hopeless idiot here."

"Hey."

"—And yet you're less of an idiot than I am."

Marie immediately interjected, and let out a sigh.

From the side, RyuZU looked surprised as she said,

"It is rare to hear words that all parties will agree with—have you hit your head or something, Master Marie?"

"Yeah. I feel like I got hit on the head by a hammer or something. Being an idiot sure feels good."

Marie happily relaxes herself as she shrugged.

—*Definitely* she thought.

Humanity might be as RyuZU had said, just a bunch of idiots.

They might end up spouting words of a loser as she did, saying that there was no value in the world.

But so what?

"In other words, there are only idiots on this world. They are all illogical, unreasonable, stubborn living beings—but even so, we should love each other, right? There may not be any value to this tattered world, but there's definitely meaning to it."

That was because though value was to be determined by others, the meaning was something they had to recognize themselves.

Thus, people lived for the sake of finding their raison d'etre.

s—Naoto Miura at least was not mistaken about this.

Marie then said,

“Okay, it’s true that you’re right, good idea to go to Tokyo. We’ll take on Mie and Tokyo at the same time, and we’ll somehow find a way to overturn the situation.”

“I don’t know what you want to do. But I’m not giving up on saving AnchoR here.”

“Understood. Our objectives won’t change. You want to save AnchoR, I want to save the world. WE’ll do what we want to do—anything for the sake of our goals.”

Halter then chimed in,

“Oi oi, Milady. I’m glad to see you pumped up again, but what’s your plan?”

“What else? **We’re going to do everything.**”

—Yes, there’s no need to put much care in choosing the right option. No matter whether I have the power I not, I won’t recognize that obligation.

“You’re seriously being mistaken here. We’re not the allies of justice here—we’re terrorists.”

And Marie’s thoughts began to run at breakneck pace.

Her petite body was giving off an ominous presence.

“I’m reflecting on it—till now, I haven’t been that defiant.”

And Marie clenched her fists hard.

Looking at her, Naoto retreated slightly, muttering,

“Erm…I wanna ask if I’ve somehow been forced into the role of an outrageous guy?”

“Relax Naoto. Thanks to you pushing me from behind, we’re going to get AnchoR.”

“I’ll try pushing you. Either that, or leave it to me to ram a car and knock you out.”

And Naoto’s attitude changed at the speed of light.

Looking at this scene, Halter’s lips twitched.

“I don’t know what you guys are thinking…but it’s definitely not a good thing.”

Marie nodded.

“Of course it isn’t. We’re going to do bad things here.”

She grinned at a muttering Halter, and turned towards Naoto,

“Now then, two questions I want to ask you.”

“Erm I have a very bad feeling about this, but what are they?”

Marie pointed her index finger at the person in front of her.

“First up. According to your tone, it sounds like you’re somehow able to stop AnchoR. Is that actually possible?”

“Yes.”

Naoto answered immediately.

However, RyuZU refuted,

“…If I may say so, Master Naoto. A machine that can best that girl in combat—”

“No, you can do it, RyuZU. I know without you saying that; I won’t let you be destroyed, and I won’t let AnchoR be destroyed. We’ll save AnchoR as to what she wished for. That’s definite.”

"Alright. We'll leave that to you."

Without asking for any basis, Marie then proceeded with the next question,

"Next, for RyuZU and AnchoR, how far are you willing to go to ensure both of their safeties?"

"I'll definitely do anything. Is there a need to ask?"

Marie curled her lips into a smirk,

"—Halter, you heard that, right? Did you record it?"

"Ahh, yeah…"

"You said that you're willing to do anything, right? You said it, you said it out there; don't think of taking back your words once you said it."

While Marie approached with vague intentions, Naoto backed away slightly saying,

"Eh, erm…no, well, I'm willing to do anything, yeah, if RyuZU and AnchoR can be saved without getting hurt. I'll have to pass if I have to die here. RyuZU most probably won't agree with that."

The moment Naoto answered this, RyuZU showed hostility in her eyes as she stepped forward, ostensibly protecting Naoto,

"—Of course, if you wish for Master Naoto's death or anything that will endanger him, Master Marie, please be mentally prepared for what happens afterwards. Since you got Master Naoto involved in this so carelessly and nearly cost him his life, I do have some thoughts with regards to that—"

"Don't worry. I won't let anyone die here. Nobody, none at all."

Marie relaxed her shoulders, and let out a wry smile,

"But, well…I guess. Naoto, what's your next remedial about ?"

"Eh? Modern history…?"

"I see, so that's good, I guess. When you return back, there's no need to study that textbook anymore."

"…Hm?"

"I'm going to record your name in the textbook and make you the worst terrorist in history, got it♪"

Well, Halter interrupted,

"After all that show stuff, what exactly are you planning there, Milady?"

After hearing this question, Marie answered with a beam,

"It's simple, actually."

She paused,

"We're going to attack Tokyo before the gigantic Mie weapon."

Without waiting for the trio to understand her words, Marie continued on,

"According to what our side has gathered, and what you just said, I have a rough guess to what that weapon is used for. There's still a little question of how we're going to get that gigantic weapon to Tokyo though—"

With that size roaming on the land with the reinforced armor on it, it'll destroy everything in its path from Mie to Tokyo when it moves forward.

By that time, it would not just be a problem for Tokyo alone. All the 'miitaries' in the path would fight back, and if the situation was disadvantageous, the 'militaries' from other countries may be dispatched to deal with it.

The crux that no matter how powerful that weapon was, it would not be very fast given its size. AS long as that weapon remained in a certain city, it would be destroyed alone with the city, sunk without being able to put up a fight,

In other words, Marie concluded,

“It’s a weapon that moves underground. The reason why it’s built underground isn’t just for cover. That hangar down there’s a launching dock connected to the deep underground “

At the same time, that would be the chance of winning for the Mie ‘military’.

One could imagine that they could not possibly station any forces in the deep underground.

Because nobody would have expected a weapon moving underground in the first place.

Once they were attacked from the underground, it would be meaningless no matter how many forces the ‘military’ deploy on the surface. If they did not destroy the city complete, there would be a possibility of them taking the Core Tower controlling the entire Tokyo region as hostage.

“So that’s why we’re going to start off with a terrorist act.”

“But what exactly are we going to do for that? Bomb the National Diet Building?”

Naoto looked a little bitter as he said that, and Marie stared at him blankly, saying,

“Idiot, it’s meaningless to do such a thing. I’m thinking of something grander than that—we’re going to use that time to control the entire Tokyo Grid.”

“You mean…like what happened in Kyoto?”

The memory of Marie and Naoto seizing control of the Core Tower to save Kyoto was fresh in the mind.

Are we doing that again? and in response to Naoto's question. Marie nodded,

"Yeah. We'll be able to evacuate the residents first, and as long as we leak false intel, we'll lead the 'military' to the Tokyo 'command post'. With that, the Technical Forces will definitely find out that there's a weapon moving under them. We'll just leave it to those guys…it's a battle of prides here."

"I want to go into the details…but I have a rough gist of what you're saying here."

Halter interrupted,

"But Milady, we are a little lacking in people to execute this plan. We also don't have much time, and if we're going to force our way through like this, both sides will not be ignoring us here. In the worst case scenario, AnchoR will be coming for us."

"That's the one thing I'm hoping for here—but well, it's fine."

Marie grinned, and shrugged,

"I know that you may know about this, but I do have a lot of reliable friends here, you know?"

"—Do you really enjoy wrecking a lonely kid's heart?"

And in response, Naoto's inferiority complex was in full bloom as he muttered.

Chapter 4 - 00:00 Returner

Gear Era 1016, February 6th, 10.34am.

Approximately 75km below the city of Mie, at the bottom of the city's structures.

It slowly began to move, in that place the residents on the surface would definitely not see.

That was a massive metal spider.

320m tall, 932m long

The size was so massive it was unfathomable to think that it could move, and yet it was rumbling as it moved forward.

It burrowed up from the deep underground at the bottom of the city—in fact, space itself, and proceeded forth while breaking free from gravity itself.

In front of it was the Capital sphere of Japan—the Multiple Grid Tokyo.

Slowly, it began to move forward.

It would probably take half a day to arrive.

But while burrowing through the Clockwork Planet, the hollow floating in space, it continued to approach its prey accurately, desiring to deal a fatal blow, and surely this was an exceptionally dangerous thing that may end up destroying this planet.

This ominous spider continued to climb without anyone knowing, but a shadow observed it in secrecy.

"So it began to move…?"

The silver hair swayed as the profile muttered,

“This thing is really hideous beyond anything one is allowed to see…but it really is threatening.”

While saying these spiteful words, the shadow, RyuZU, narrowed her eyes.

Once she confirmed the monster’s actions, path and speed, she silently left the scene without anyone catching sight of her.

●

Gear Era 1016, February 6th, 6.27pm

There was a construct called the 4th Clock Tower at Tokyo, Japan, Grid Akihabara, Yasukuni Highway.

Basically, all Clock Towers were to be controlled under the ‘military’, but this was a rare exception used for technical research, and the nearby college was entrusted with the maintenance.

Some people were walking through the campus of this Akihabara Technical College.

They were dressed in similar blue work clothes, pushing carts that were carrying large loads, passing through the campus brazenly under the red sunset. There were still many students and teaching faculty in school, but none of them noticed those them walking in the campus.

And so, with nobody to obstruct them, they arrived at the cargo entrance of the Clock Tower.

There was a metal door and a little guard room set up there, and a guard, slightly aged, stared suspiciously at the group that was delivering this large set of cargo.

Their leader, a massive man akin to a standing bear, smiled as he raised his voice,

“Hello! Good work there. Thank you for always taking care of us here.”

"Y-yeah, many thanks…may I know what do you need?"

The guard answered vaguely, and the hulking figure bared his teeth, showing a refreshing smile, fishing out a document from the document bag tucked under his armpit.

"We're from Success Transporters, here to deliver the new observation equipment."

"Eh, I never heard of that before…?"

"Ah great. This is a bother. Did they make a mistake with the contact again?"

The hulking man gave an exaggerated frown, and let out a little grumble,

"It's the 3rd time this year. These college professors really suck at dealing with the procedures properly…ah, it's nothing, pardon me."

"Don't worry, I understand."

The large man apologized, and the guard gave a bitter smile, saying,

"I guess it's most likely Professor Kizaki? There are students always complaining about him behind his back, but he's so careless despite him being so serious to them."

"Eh, well, it seems like he's being the same as usual."

The large man looked worried as he bent his back, and pointed at the document that was handed out,

"I heard that Professor Kizaki was suddenly dispatched from today onwards, and we couldn't contact him. He wanted to get to work immediately, so he requested for us to set up the equipment while he is on leave here…I guess it's inconvenient after all?"

"Hm…well, you do need a request form from the professors in the first place…"

The guard expressed his sympathy, and nodded,

“Well, your documents look rather formal here, so I guess it’s fine. I’ll give the professor a reminder once you come back>”

“Thank you very much! You’re seriously a great help here!”

“No no, you have worked hard there. I shall open the door now.”

The kind-hearted guard maintained his smile as he pressed the switch beside his hand.

The door opened, and the hulking man received the stamped document, bowing as he expressed his thanks.

The gang dressed in work clothes pushed the cart as they entered the cargo path.

Once they made sure the guard room could not be seen, the hulking man—Halter, let out a laugh, saying,

“—Anyway, the security at college’s typically like this, Professor Hannes.”

“This really is unbelievable, Halter.”

Answering him was the man pushing the cart behind him. That middle-aged man had a chiseled, rectangular face, and did not seem to be one who would show much emotion.

“That one document alone’s enough to get anyone of unknown identity into the Clock Tower?”

“The ‘military’ definitely won’t do that. For normal people however, they look at the clothes and attitude It’s not easy to end up suspicious if you wear some jumpsuits from a freight company and say some words there.”

The name, Hannes, gave a look of disapproval,

“But it’s really a nice coincidence that the professor went out, huh?”

“Ah, not really, that was an arrangement by the Breguets.”

“…What did you just say?”

“It’s a college, and not a place to be rude. We just randomly arranged some work and got the professor to leave. Thanks to that, we’re going to be the only ones in this Clock Tower.”

After hearing Halter’s words, Hannes let out a deep sigh, and repeated,

“…This is seriously unbelievable.”

“You did once work with that tomboy, but it seems like you’re by-the-book there.”

Halter raised his lips as he teased.

However, Hannes looked stumped as he immediately answered back,

“Tomboy? As far as I know, she’s a lady who’s very serious, honest and outstanding, no?”

“…Well, words themselves aren’t very convenient.”

That description was not necessarily wrong, but it did seem amiss somewhere.

Halter took a deep breath, shook his head, and changed the topic,

“Anyway, if anything happens here, I’ll deal with it, professor, so please focus on your work. We’ll set the limit, including the setting up of the equipment to be 4 hours. Is that okay?”

“Of course. I am a Meister after all. Trust me on it.”

Hannes, the ex Observation team leader of the Meister Guild, boasted this proudly.

And in response to those words, Halter gave a wry smile, nodded and lowered his head.

"—I guess it is rude on my part."

●

Gear Era 1016, February 8th, 0:00.

Just right before the day that would be recorded in the annuls of human history.

Marie Bell Breguet was at Grid Akihabara in Tokyo, Japan, the First Clock Tower.

She was in a room filled with clockwork functions similar to that of the Core Tower, and in that room, there were dozens of technicians hard at work.

—They had to control the Core Tower and the various Clock Towers to execute Marie's plan.

And they were all working on this job without any break.

Of course, they were not part of the Technical Forces which regularly maintain the place.

Their race, gender and ages were all different, and their clothing, equipment lacked a sense of cohesion. The only common them they had was the Chronopass they had on their wrists.

That was the proof of a Meister.

A highly intricate clock with 9 faces of various sizes.

That was a medal given to the highest of the 200 million Clockwork Technicians.

No matter how many hundreds Technicians came to work together, they would be no match for a Meister. These Technicians themselves had

extraordinary talent and abilities , and amongst them, one of them called out,

“Professor Marie!”

Marie, engrossed in scribbling calculations at the work desk, lifted her head.

“Yes, go head.”

“We’ve confirmed numbers 3340 to 7990. All checks in all levels have been completed.”

“—Got it. Affirmed. Good work.”

Marie nodded, and this time, another technician staring at the communicator yelled,

“Report! The 4th Clock Tower has reported that all level functions have been completed. Now transferring the temperature control system and administrator limits to all levels.”

“—Understood. Please reply ‘When it’s about time for the operation, please escape immediately once the final checks are done’. Also, relay the same message to the other Clock Towers.”

A few incoming reports, some affirmations and instructions given later, Marie took a large breath.

She sat on the chair, stretching her back to loosen her tense muscles.

And a man, recently entering old age, spoke up,

“We finally made it.”

He elegantly placed the cup giving off steam on the table, and continued,

“Red tea, with lots of honey and milk. I do remember you saying you like sweet things?”

Marie's expression eased as she picked the cup up.

"Thank you, Mechanic Leader Conrad."

"I'm no longer a Mechanic Team leader, Professor Marie."

The man, Conrad, calmly corrected,

"…So you are."

Holding the steaming cup at her lips, Marie lowered her eyes.

Back when Marie was with the 'Meister Guild', Conrad was the team leader of the Mechanics, and was responsible for assisting Marie. He was an experienced, capable technician, and stayed till the end of the crisis in Kyoto.

After that incident, he resigned from the 'Guild', and turned to working as a freelance clockwork technician on the streets. The one who helped investigate the suspicious movements of the Tokyo 'military' was none other than Conrad himself.

"The most important thing is that the work is finished without any hitches…we'll have to overexert everyone."

"No no, all of us do enjoy working with you. In fact, it seems all the Clock Towers are emptied, so the works a lot easier."

"…Though this is one huge criminal operation."

She tasted the sweet hot red tea, and paused.

She wondered about these technicians who were with her here, and the ones working in the other Clock Towers.

Most of them were like Conrad, formerly Marie's subordinates, Meisters who quit the 'Guild' after the Kyoto incident and became unemployed.

—We'll hijack the city's functions and take on the invading massive weapon.

Anyone would have wondered that Marie's plan was reckless, and yet they took part without commenting on it.

These people had valuable skills, and most likely, they would have obtained the jobs and treatments they desired; yet they participated in this plan that was without rewards, and even criminal.

For they were requested by Marie Bell Breguet; that was their only reason.

And after recalling this fact, Marie felt so much heartfelt thanksgiving and gratitude, her cheeks blushing.

"I'm really—grateful."

At that moment, the communicator on the table let out a ringtone.

Marie pressed the receiving switch, and there were the words,

"—Marie, you ready?"

It was Naoto's voice. He seemed a little excited, his voice shriller than usual.

Marie curled her lips, saying to the voice receiver,

"—Of course. Who do you think I am?"

"I'll leave it to you then, Meister."

"Of course. Please finish your job too."

Understood. Naoto answered so briefly, and the call got cut.

Marie switched off the communicator, and Conrad asked,

"Was that 'him'?"

"Yes. It's Naoto Miura."

Marie nodded, and Conrad muttered as he let out a sigh,

"I did witness it personally yesterday, but I do find it unbelievable no matter how I look at it. He managed to observe the Core Tower and the 12 Clock Towers just by his own hearing at that level of assistance equipment…"

"But it's reality."

Naoto managed to hear the entire structure of Akihabara, and Marie translated it into a diagram.

They analyzed the structure of the Core Tower and the various Clock Towers, and manipulated 4 Clock Towers to hijack the Core Tower to create a system that could freely manipulate the temperature and communications network—

Such a ridiculous job would need hundreds of years to be grasped, yet Naoto and Marie were able to complete it all in 3 days.

"If the Core Tower is the brain of the city, the Clock Towers will be the organs. For example, this would be basically nudging the organs to interfere with the brain…the Core Tower and the Clock Towers are linked, so theoretically speaking, it isn't impossible, but…it's surprising."

Of course, this was completed with the help of dozens of Meisters, but…

Conrad let out a mutter with a deep voice,

"As a Clockwork Technician myself, I am very terrified."

Conrad himself was a Meister, the apex of all Clockwork Technicians.

It could be said that he had researched on the latest clockwork technology humanity had, and was well versed in them. It was not a boast; he really had the accomplishments and experiences to back that up.

But the talent he could not understand at all existed in this current reality,

"Somehow, I wonder…if that talent of his is really some a human has?"

"He's a human, Professor Conrad."

Marie immediately answered, and lowered her eyes,

"He's not a convenient God, and he's not a convenient magician. He's no different from us, just an ordinary idiot that can be seen everywhere."

"…"

"But though he's an idiot—looking at what happened in Kyoto back then, and this incident, he's a lot better than the brains of those guys who planned those stuff. No matter how abnormal that ability is—Naoto's filled with 'humanity' at least."

Humans certainly were not correct, not completely perfect, not truly omnipotent.

No matter who it was, everyone was born without a value, foolishly making mistakes, and yet if the way to live was to work hard, obtain the meaning of human life and progress forward,

—Then Naoto Miura would be the most human-like person Marie Bell Breguet knew of.

Conrad briefly stared at Marie,

"—Yes. You are right here."

And so, he quietly muttered.

And then, it seemed he had a sudden notion as he spoke up,

"Actually I had been wondering all this time, but,"

"Yes?"

Marie tilted her head, and Conrad muttered in a teasing mutter,

"You really are bad at faking your true personality."

"Eh…?"

Marie blurted out a stunned voice.

And Conrad grinned, saying,

“But I do think this true self of yours makes you more charming, Professor Marie.”

“—P-please don’t tease me here!”

Conrad enjoyed the pouting face of the girl, ostensibly a granddaugther to him, and turned his head.

The technicians had stopped working for some time, staring at their conversation, and Conrad looked back at their faces, clapping his hands.

With a deep, astringent voice, he said,

"…Now then, it's about time, everyone. Let us all enjoy the instance before history's changed."

●

February 7th, right when it was about to be February 8th.

The events that would be called the 'Akihabara Terrorist Incident', and the prelude incident to the 'February 8th uprising' began.

—On a boy's command,

There was an intense quake spanning a 30km radius with Akihabara Grids as the epicenter.

All communication functions ceased, and the "Resonance Gears" within started to function beyond their specifications.

The core towers of gear arrays, which regulated the functions of the city, started acting in a way never seen before.

This was neither an ordinary malfunction nor a sign of defect after years of wear and tear. The systems were running normally, but for some reason, it was not running according to its manager's instructions.

And 5 minutes after it happened.

The communication functions, which had ceased for a while, suddenly started to work again.

The people, who were unable to do anything and watched the developments in silence, heard a 'criminal statement' through the

television and radio from a ridiculously agitated criminal.
"Good evening, ladies—and—gentlemen!! And all foolish, mediocre and ordinary citizens who do not fit these categories!! Pardon me for disturbing your enjoyment of the weekend night!!"

The voice being broadcasted was doctored to resemble a drunk emcee speaking, echoing everywhere.

After hearing these words, Conrad frowned, seemingly perturbed,

"Deary me, I really can't keep up with the thinking of young people these days…"

And beside him, Marie, who too had her head in her hands, groaned,

"No…actually, do you mind not thinking of that idiot as a representative of young people?"

Marie and Conrad had to stay with the system construction, and so they left the criminal statement for Naoto to handle, yet it ended up like that.

This unprecedented, never to be replicated historic event—was contrasted with an overly crude criminal statement; it was too late even though Marie regretted it.

"Ahh, goodness, I'll definitely tell him off later!—How's the false information going?"

The clockwork technician in charge of the control panel answered,

"Proceeding successfully! All 168 channels maintained. No signs of it being discovered!"

"—Understood. Observation team, where's the gigantic weapon?"

"It's moving below Grid Shibuya right no! Looking at the 'military's actions, it'll take about 56 minutes before both sides meet!"

"—Understood. Looks like it's going successfully. Please prepare the temperature controls!"

Marie proceeded with the next instruction, and Conrad said,

"Professor Marie, the rest can be left to us."

"…Please do so. Now then, I'll meet up with them as planned and proceed with the next phase. Once the operation is done, please escape immediately."

Understood. After hearing the replies in unison, Marie grabbed her coat and bag, before racing out.

Putting on her coat, she ran up the emergency stairs to the roof of the Clock Tower.

The warm night wind grazed her cheeks.

The light gears converted gravity as light, and with the brightness lighting everything, no stars could be seen in the sky.

All she could see what the silver moon and the 'Equatorial Spring' that was revolving due to the moon's gravity.

She could hear Naoto's ridiculous 'criminal statement' from some speakers.

Marie yelled,

"Ryu—ZU!!"

"—There is no need to shout as I am here to pick you up, Master Marie."

A cold voice could be heard from behind.

Marie turned back, and found the silhouette of the automata with the silver hair swaying in the night wind.

"In fact, it is you who is late by two seconds, Master Marie. In this situation where a slight delay may result in a precarious situation, this failure is—"

“Then hurry up and make up for lost time!”

Marie growled as she leapt at RyuZU.

RyuZU was obviously looking uppity—and so, she unwillingly, picked Marie up in a cradle before moving.

She leaped off the roof.

They were headed towards Naoto who was at the roof of a building in front of the station, stating his ‘criminal intent’ alone. That would be the place where they would meet up.

Holding Marie, RyuZU raced through the streets of Akihabara. It seemed there was a tense, wary atmosphere from the streets passing by below them due to the ‘criminal statement’.

“—uu, let’s begin!”

Marie muttered briefly as she raised her finger.

She was pointing at the red steel tower in the night sky—the ancient relic called the Tokyo Tower could be seen gradually frozen white.

“It’s about time for the final phase of this operation.”

The frozen Tokyo Tower was shattered, and it was to show to the entire Tokyo a visible threat.

It was a show of power to affirm that Grid Akihabara was under control. Once that was done, they would immediately end the declaration and proceed to the next phase.

With an icy tone, RyuZU continued,

“More importantly, and something I have been worried about right from the beginning, is that the enemy has taken action 2 minutes and 37 seconds faster than what I expected.”

RyuZU tilted her head aside slightly, looking afar.

Marie looked over at where RyuZU was looking at, and found 3 large shadows flying silently through the night sky.

“Silent helicopters…!”

Those were military weapons with assault-type automata’s stored within them. All three of them were headed in the same path as them—headed towards the roof where Naoto was.

As there was real information revealed when Naoto stated his intent, it was to be expected that they would have grasped his actual location, yet it was faster than what they expected.

There was also a difference in speed between the silent helicopters flying in the air and RyuZU who was jumping around on the roofs, causing the distance between them to pull upon.

—If this kept up, Naoto would be attacked by the silent helicopters before RyuZU could even reach him.

“And I can see that there are security automatas on the ground.”

Marie looked down upon hearing RyuZU’s words, and found that the security automatas were chasing towards the building Naoto was at with rotating red lights. There were dozens of them.

They were a lot weaker in threat compared to the silent helicopters, but they still could not be left ignored. They had the appearances of walking cylinders, but a single one was sufficient in suppressing a human of flesh and blood.

—What do I do?

Just when Marie was frowning and wondering how to respond, RyuZU whispered,

“Master Marie, do you have a weapon, am I correct?”

“Eh? Of course, I do have the Coil Spear, but why…?”

Marie nodded in affirmation, and RyuZU stoically responded,

“Now then, I have to hasten myself, so I shall leave the small fries below to you.”

“Eh? —Kyaaa!!!?”

Marie was thrown into orbit before she could even answer, and shrieked.

While spinning around, she hurriedly drew the anchor wire from her holster, and fired it.

And on the other hand, RyuZU, having thrown her ‘excess baggage’ aside, chased after the helicopters with increased speed.

“Ow-owowow…that shitty automata…!”

Marie cussed as she lifted her face, but gasped,

“”””Suspicious persons discovered—””””

Warning sirens blared.

She landed right in the middle of the security automatas that were racing through the streets.

And at this moment, they were surrounding this suspicious girl who fell from the sky, and was armed with a weapon.

“Wai…!”

Marie hurriedly drew the Coil Spear from the holster on her waist.

And at the same time, the security automatas, having determined the increased threat level, poked out the barrels of their riot guns.

“”””Resistance determined—eliminating.””””

“If you’re going to drop me off somewhere, at least put me in a better place, you piece of scrap—!”

Marie yelled, neither screaming nor growling, and retreated away from that place.

Gunshots could be heard immediately afterwards.

●

Afterwards,

Marie broke through countless dangerous situations, before finally wiping out all the security automatas.

Once she was sure she did not miss out on any enemy, she hurriedly raced to the roof of the building.

She ran up the emergency staircase, ignoring the severed wreckages of the burning helicopters.

And once she arrived at the roof, she found the automata that were reduced to scraps, Halter with his back facing her, Naoto who was sprawled on the floor for some reason, and—

"—!"

A nonchalant looking RyuZU.

Once she found RyuZU, Marie fired the Coil Spear without a second thought.

The bullet raced towards RyuZU without deviating—only to miss because the latter took a step back.

"…That was dangerous, Princess."

"Halter."

The girl quickly approached as she greeted Halter, who was giving off cold sweat.

“Go catch that relic there. I must open her apart and create her personality structure today.”

Halter shrugged and sighed,

“Please don’t make me do something so impossible, Milady. How do you expect me to do that?”

“How else are you going to show off your real ability? Go catch that relic with that marine-style, close combat fighting skills or something—it’s fine if you break it though.”

“I’ve always been in the armed forces. Anyway, what’s going on?”

Marie did not answer as she swung the small gunblade—the Coil Spear in her right hand to the ground, and changed it into its blade form.

“THIS DAMNED RELIC—LEFT ME BEHIND AND RAN OFF JUST WHEN WE WERE SURROUNDED BY THE SECURITY AUTOMATONS!”

Having lost her patience, Marie raised her voice.

She roared with all her might as she swung the blade at RyuZU. The sharp swing, combined with the momentum from the upper body, was easily dodged by RyuZU however as she lightly leapt to dodge it.

“Oh my, the plating has worn off.”

“YOU’RE TOO NOISY!”

“If it had been Miss Marie, who always proclaims herself to be a genius girl who can do everything, the mere disposable Automatons should not have been a problem, no matter if there were 10 or 20 of them, am I correct?”

“HOW IN THE WORLD IS THAT POSSIBLE!? I NEARLY THOUGHT I WOULD DIE BACK THEN!!”

“Such—”

RyuZU widened her eyes in surprise.

"…I am sorry. Though I have tried my best to underestimate Miss Marie as much as I could, I never thought you would be such a perfect small fry…please allow me to express my deepest apologizes."

"…I'll rip you apart! I'll definitely rip you apart…!"

Marie's Coil Spear changed form, and just when she was about to deploy its blade…

"Quiet—"

Naoto was still sprawled on the concrete floor, muttering with a hushed voice.

The trio reacted to this voice, ceased their actions, and turned their stares silently at him.

Naoto placed his ear on the concrete roof, and continued:

"Those guys—are headed to the "Activation Bureau", just as we had planned."

Things are going well. Marie thought.

The Tokyo 'military' gathered at the Tokyo Core Tower were led to the underground due to the false information they leaked. If things were to proceed so smoothly, the gigantic weapon would meet the 'military' at the bottom of the city.

"3021 Automatons, and 1765 foot soldiers.

"…I guess that's all the stationed troops they could immediately deploy."

Halter scratched his head and smiled, while Marie kept her Coil Spear, and said,

"But our location has been confirmed, right?"

"From what I can hear from here, there are seven of them coming—not the silent helicopters though. They're real Gatling assault helicopters—without any Automatons in them."

"Those are the heavy arms helicopters Japan currently has that it can mobilize…the PTK-A74, huh?"

RyuZU asked:

"Do they possess a significant amount of threat?"

"These are independent unmanned assault helicopters with two Resonance Cannons on them…to put it this way, seven of them can turn this area into complete ash without resupply."

"Alright, let's go. Hey, Naoto, how much time do we have left?"

Halter asked, and Naoto then suddenly got up.

"They'll arrive in—another 372 seconds."

"Let us retreat before we meet any enemies then. I will carry the luggage."

RyuZU stacked Naoto's equipment together and raised it easily.

In the meantime, Naoto pulled out the unnecessary cables from his headphones, and put his headphones on again. He then switched on the Noise Canceller.

…Ahh. He took a deep breath.

…It's finally peaceful now.

Upon seeing Naoto like this, Marie asked softly,

"Hey, Naoto, are you alright?"

"…Hm, sorta."

Though Naoto nodded, to Marie, it seemed he was forcing himself.

His face was ridiculously pale, and there was a lot of sweat dripping from his forehead.

—*I guess* she thought.

No matter how much of an extraordinary talent that was, it was not some convenient miracle. It was a power that was beyond an equivalent price.

While Naoto staggered to his feet, Marie expressed her concerns, saying,

"You do feel some burden from that, after all…"

"No. It's my fault…sorry."

Then, Naoto gave a thumbs up behind him.

"It seems there's a brothel in that building over there."

"……Huh??"

"They're always—~ yapping here and there, making a ruckus without reading the moo—"

Before she could hear the rest, an utterly blushing Marie punched Naoto right in the chin.

And while Marie was silently stomping on the back of Naoto's head whilst the latter had collapsed, Halter spoke up,

"Forget about it, Milady. That brain juice will affect the world's future."

"The ways of this world are too crazy."

"…Well, how exactly, does it sound absurd coming from you?"

While Naoto groaned from right under Marie's foot, Halter sighed, saying,

"Let's hurry up. It's not the time for some small play."

"…Ah, don't worry, Halter."

Naoto said as he staggered to his feet, patted off the dust on his clothes, and adjusted his headphones.

"As long as we work together, a metropolis with a population of 40 million will be in our hands."

"…It'll be great if that happens."

Halter patted his bald head as he muttered,

And the 4 of them ran down the emergency staircase.

They passed the helicopters that had exploded upon landing, and ran to the rotary in front of the station.

The large monitor in front of the station was displaying an emergency broadcast, clearly reporting this unprecedented terrorist attack.

They stopped in the plaza packed with evacuees, and Halter said,

"Now then, as Milady and I have agreed, once we make sure the professors have evacuated, we'll be working for you in the workshop."

"We'll leave AnchoR to you guys. Don't get careless and die there."

"Don't worry about that."

Naoto merely smiled back at Marie's words.

But at this moment, RyuZU interrupted, trying to convince her to stay,

"No, my apologies, but do you mind coming along with us, Master Marie?"

Marie tilted her head in skepticism,

"—Me too?"

"RyuZU?"

Naoto did not understand her question, and RyuZU lowered her eyes slightly, looking docile,

“I can be certain that I cannot beat AnchoR by myself when the latter is at full power. What I proposed to Master Naoto was a chance to make the impossible possible—if anything is to happen to Master Naoto, I suppose I may not be able to operate.”

“…”

“For that reason, I wish to have Master Marie come along too just in case.”

And after saying that, RyuZU gave a deep bow.

Marie silently widened her eyes.

Even after considering the spiteful tongue filter that RyuZU had, Marie was unable to accept the former’s attitude towards anyone other than Naoto as mere bugs, and yet RyuZU actually lowered her head.

Marie gulped, and slowly nodded,

“—Okay then. I don’t think I have a way to deal with AnchoR, but if you think that’s the case, I guess it’s fine to just go along with you. Live or die, I’ll be with you guys until the very end.”

“That is a nice resolve you have, Master Marie.”

RyuZU lifted her head, and spoke that with a straight face.

Marie turned back to look up at Halter’s massive body

“Halter, are you able to handle all that alone?”

“Yeah, there’s still Professor Conrad. That old man isn’t an amateur there. Even without you around, Milady, it’s just commanding all the workers to leave.”

"…If you dare show any disrespect to Professor Conrad, I'm going to choke you later."

Marie glared furiously at a joking Halter.

And from aside, Naoto interrupted in surprise,

"Hey, Professor Conrad's that old man, right? Is this really alright?"

"Yeah. Don't be fooled by his appearance—"

Marie shrugged,

"He's able to beat a dozen of light-armored automatas or so with just a screwdriver."

"…What!?"

Naoto exclaimed, and Halter complained,

"To be honest, I'm really not good at dealing with that man. He had to insist that he knows all the structures of my prosthetics, and can beat be down without using any external force…"

"…No no no, that should be a lie, right? Was that too much of an exaggeration?"

"He really isn't bluffing, you know?"

Marie firmly concluded.

And from the bottom of his heart, Naoto asked with a skeptical look.

"I didn't think it's possible…but are the people in the 'Guild' martial oriented like Marie?"

"That's not possible, is it? It's basically an Intelligence organization."

"…Of course!"

Naoto heaved a sigh of relief, and Marie continued,

But since maintaining the Clock Towers is a battle of physical strength, everyone would have trained their bodies somewhat, you know? On a side note, Professor Conrad's the one who taught me self-defense."

"…That nasty thing's self-defense?"

Naoto recalled the leg techniques Marie used to take down two 'military' soldiers in an instant, and his back shivered in fear.

—That has to be a technique to kill no matter how I think about that.

"Well, besides,"

Marie curled her lips into a smile, saying,

"When fighting against the Earth's 'military', I have to at least do some crush—self-defense."

"You just said 'crushing' there, didn't you!?"

Naoto shrieked, and Marie replied with a grin.

After that, Halter bid them farewell, and the trio departed the scene.

They were headed towards the underground parking lots in front of the station.

To wait for AnchoR, they chose a very spacious place that was devoid of perrsons.

Though they took a position where they could observe the entrance, RyuZU muttered,

"…Will she really come here?"

"She will."

"She'll."

In response to RyuZU's question, both Marie and Naoto concluded this based on different reasons,

"Our actions are probably not within the plans of those guys; there's no way they can predict someone starting a terrorist attack to hijack the city's functions. In that case, all the parties involved can't possibly ignore us here, and AnchoR's the only one able to fight RyuZU."

"…That girl will definitely come, to meet you, AnchoR. To be precise, it's to get you, RyuZU—to destroy her."

Naoto narrowed his eyes, and stared into RyuZU's eyes as he said,

"But there's no way I'll allow that. I'll end this with both sides safe and sound. So RyuZU—please stop AnchoR."

"Yes, since it is as you wish, Master Naoto. Furthermore—"

RyuZU placed her hand on her chest,

"…Conservatively put, I wish to avoid hurting my little sister as much as I can."

She lowered her eyes, stating her true thoughts.

—Afterwards,

AnchoR appeared from the entrance of the underground parking lots.

●

The basement was dim.

And this place, far from the chaos on the surface, was filled with a tranquil atmosphere.

The two Initial-Y series units faced off against each other, from about 30m apart.

That was a distance so close for both sides, they could instantly shrink it.

On one side was a young girl automata in a red and white dress—AnchoR.

On the other side was a silver-haired girl automata in a black and white dress—RyuZU.

Though there were Naoto and Marie, standing still and gulping tensely behind RyuZU, AnchoR was looking at her big sister through the mask.

And with a calm tone, RyuZU said,

"Do you hear me, AnchoR?"

There was no answer.

But RyuZU did not mind as she continued,

"Your voice is heard by my Master. You are restrained by a filthy machine, your soul trampled. I thoroughly understand the humiliation you're suffering, but—"

She paused,

"I absolutely refuse to destroy you."

Her eyes narrowed, and she continued to declare to the still silent AnchoR.

"As your older sister, and as my Master's servant, I will save you. For that reason, you need to fight too, AnchoR. Not for anyone else, but for your own will; you have to protect your own will."

AnchoR did not answer.

But the cube dangling in front of the chest fell from the chain and silently floated.

RyuZU took on the challenge, and made a step forward.

"I'm going."

—The voice came out.

It was not the usual carefree, melodic voice.

The professional, robotic voice that came with RyuZU's words—or rather, **the declaration,**

"Defining Declaration—Initial-Y series Unit 1 'Yourslave' RyuZU."

Immediately afterwards,

AnchoR, who had been silent till this point, finally let out a voice,

"Defining Declaration—Initial-Y series Unit 4 'Trishula' AnchoR."

The transformations began.

With Naoto and Marie watching, the two Initial-Y series unit barged into the territory the humans living in this world definitely could not know of.

"Inherent function—Imaginary Time (Mute Scream)…beginning activation sequence."

"Inherent function—Ten Thousand Flowers Fragrance Box (Power Reservoir)…beginning transformation sequence."

Those were the insistence of resistance for those two.

And at this instance—they clearly stated their intents to **break the laws of Physics**

Naoto gasped.

The otherworldly logic hidden within RyuZU's body was beginning to show itself.

At the same time, the gnashing of the gears echoed, and with a snap, like dominoes falling, RyuZU's black dress became a different color and

make. It became a translucent veil revealing the white skin, a pearl-colored wedding dress wrapping the slender body tightly.

The golden eyes had a ruby glint in them.

"–Beginning shift from 1st clock 'Real Time' to 2nd clock 'Imaginary Time'."

"Threat level, Category Two'—difference loop, 12th Shift."

You're kidding Marie gulped.

Did—AnchoR just say 12th?

Marie did not know anything about AnchoR's Inherent Functions. Unlike Naoto, she could not grasp that instinctively, but she was able to at least deduce.

When they first met at Mie, she remembered AnchoR saying 3rd. That should have been the case. Assuming that it meant the Imaginary energy output or a limiter, the 12th would be—

While Marie was terrified, the girl's appeared gradually changed.

The cube floating at her chest twisted, and began to spin at near light speed levels.

The radiant black hair was dyed a bloody crimson. The pure white armor expanded ominously, and the glowing red lines covered the now black armor psychotically.

The angelic halo spinning above the head became a demonic horn.

The black mask covering the girl's face gave a cracking sound.

"Activating (Chrono Hook)—jumping from real movement to imaginary movement."

"Activating (Chrono Hook)—beginning Imaginary Output from Perpetual Gear, emerge.

RyuZU and AnchoR took a step forward at the same time.

Those actions were not just a physical change in position; it signified the mutations formed in those two units this world would not allow.

Imaginary time ran wild, and an infinite amount of heat accelerated, causing despair in the current universe.

AnchoR raised her voice plainly,

"Execute command…declaration, target in the front 'RyuZU'—target to be destroyed."

In response, RyuZU smiled.

"Bring it on, 'AnchoR', I shall etch the pride of an older sister on you."

Both sisters called each other by name, facing each other again, and then—

RyuZU raised the hems of her skirt slightly.

While AnchoR got on her limbs, sprawled on the ground like a beat.

Like a marriage declaration.

Like a yell of lament.

Both of them said the final words that were radical and heretical to the world.

"—Relative Mobility (Mute Scream)—"

"—Absolute Mobility (Bloody Murder)—"

And so, the two legends clashed.

Naoto and Marie were unable grasp what happened afterwards.

●

RyuZU raced through this imaginary time.

And in the time where reality stood still indefinitely—a fraction of a second, she subjugated this place.

That was an imaginary space that could not possibly exist in this universe.

A space of paradox where the laws of physics were subjected to fallacy.

As long as she remained in this state, nobody would be able to hurt her, and nobody could escape from her blades through any means.

However—

The little sister facing off against her too was an extraordinary existence that defied this world.

Nobody would be able to detect RyuZU's attacks in this imaginary time, yet AnchoR jumped to dodge it.

The bloody crimson hair let out an arch.

And at the same time, AnchoR stepped on the empty space, swinging her right hand.

The massive hand equipped with a claw was intending to rip RyuZU along with the imaginary time.

"—"

RyuZU did not show any surprise on her face. With leisurely, elegant movements, she dodged the claw, and pulled her distance.

This was to be expected at least—no, anticipated.

Even if RyuZu could break through the limits of time and take action, AnchoR was able to catch up through brute force. The infinite heat caused a derailment in the universe, and wrenched open the gap in space.

In this still world, RyuZU danced elegantly.

AnchoR in turn violently invaded the change in space.

Both automatas defied conventional 'time' through their drastically different processes.

RyuZU raised her hand.

The Initial-Y series Unit 1 'Yourslave' RyuZU."

She, expected to be a follower, had two black scythes pointing out from her skirt as her weapons. She is rather lacking compared to AnchoR, who was expected to be weapon with a countless number of weapons in her.

For that reason, RyuZU proclaimed herself to be the weakest, that she was the unit least suited for fighting amongst the sisters.

However—

"That—does not mean defeat in any way."

The black scythes obeyed RyuZU's will as they swung at an incoming AnchoR from left and right.

The slashes were quick and precise.

These two elegant, otherworldly knives remained steady as they continued to slash at anything indiscriminately, dissecting everything to bits.

However,the sharp blades got blocked by something, and let out a crisp sound.

“…!?”

RyuZU shifted her center of gravity, and skipped lightly as she turned around.

Using the momentum, AnchoR attacked.

RyuZU affirmed it; there seemed to be a ripple waving about at the empty space where the scythes got parried.

And the cube floating above AnchoR’s head twisted as it transformed.

“Space manipulation…!”

That was the basic ability of AnchoR’s weapon. Against RyuZU’s scythes, she timed the attacks and contorted small spaces to form shields.

RyuZU’s scythes did not have the ability to break through contorted space.

“…”

RyuZU again swung her scythes, prioritizing speed as she increased the attacks and swung wildly, this time anticipating that the enemy would block.

“—!”

But they got parried away.

Ripples appeared in the air along with AnchoR's voiceless sounds, ripples appeared in the air, taking down RyuZU's slashes completely.

While RyuZU was feeling anxious, AnchoR gave pursuit.

Both sides were well matched in speed—correction, RyuZU was a little faster.

This Imaginary time granted RyuZU an advantage.

No matter how much AnchoR accelerated and gave pursuit, her ability, the manipulation of space, would cause a little lag. The proof was that she did not use the countless weapons that should have been stored in her, and manipulated space only to defend.

In other words—AnchoR had to personally kill RyuZU personally.

However,

"—!"

AnchoR swung her claw. RyuZU managed to jump to the right and dodge this attack at the last moment.

The claw however swung through the space, and caused an intense quake in the space.

At the same time, the car behind RyuZU vanished.

It was reduced to dust, leaving nothing behind.

The heat AnchoR had was enough energy to open time ruptures, and it was gathered generously in her right hook.

—As long as a single claw grazed by, RyuZU's body would be ripped apart before she could even resist.

Yes. Alone? Sealing the weapons was not considered a handicap; the main issue was that RyuZU's attacks could not break through AnchoR's defenses. Even if RyuZU could act a little faster, her functions would

cease sooner or laster when the energy in the spring was used up. Perhaps even before that, she would be caught and crushed into dust.

That was the conclusion—the outcome of this battle that would soon happen.

However—

"Things are as I expected—no, **just as planned.**"

RyuZU muttered this as as she dodged the claw that ripped through space with utmost conviction.

Her face showed no fear. That was something she already understood beforehand.

—3 days ago.

During the strategic meeting, Naoto and RyuZU had this conversation.

"If I am to fight AnchoR head on, my chances of winning is zero."

RyuZU concluded, and Naoto looked distraught, saying,

"It's not like you have to win though? As long as you're able to break that mask—"

"It means the same thing, Master Naoto. There exists a difference in combat abilities between AnchoR and me that I cannot hope to overcome."

"…Even if you use your inherent function?"

"Yes. Even if I do activate the Imaginary Time, AnchoR will catch up to me through brute force. That girl has the infinite heat to achieve this."

"In that case, there's only one answer."

Upon seeing her master nod, RyuZU asked,

"And that is?"

It's simple, Noto answered.

"—Just use me as a shield."

"That is unacceptable."

RyuZU immediately dismissed this, and stared at Naoto,

"There is no worth considering it. Do you really understand what you just proposed?"

"But there's no other way."

"There is. That is to avoid the battle."

RyuZU's stare was beyond freezing point as she declared,

"If I may bluntly say so, AnchoR's imprisonment is simply a trivial issue compared to endangering you, Master Naoto. Even if Tokyo is to collapse and millions, billions of humans inferior to mitochondria are to fall to the bottom of the planet, I do not care—"

Yes, that was the one bottom line RyuZU definitely would not cross.

"—"

RyuZU jumped.

With the scythes hooking to the pipes at the ceiling, she swung her body.

Because of this action, she again dodged AnchoR's claw at the last moment, avoiding destruction.

At the same time, she looked behind. The silhouette of her little sister kept attacking. The massive amount of heat stored in the latter's body was contorting the surrounding space just by being there.

It was like fire, ominously engulfing AnchoR's body.

RyuZU turned her body around, and kicked the ceiling.

The 2 scythes and legs activated the 3 dimensions in the sealed space—she moved in like a pinball towards AnchoR's range—

But AnchoR remained unfazed.

The cube transformed into a non-Euclidean geometry.

"—!?"

A large scale contortion occurred, and the web of space attacked RyuZU.

One of the extended scythes got caught by that web, and an intense tremor shook the body. Like paper scraps, the caught scythe was crushed, and her center of gravity was tilted, before she was thrown out.

Right at the moment her body was about to be thrown to the wall, RyuZU used the remaining scythe to cut off the damaged scythe, for it was useless, merely a hindrance.

Now freed in her posture, she landed directly on the wall—and immediately jumped all.

At that instance, the wall she used as footing was blown to smithereens.

—She recalled.

"And please do pardon my impudence here, Master Naoto, but you sacrificing your life will not solve anything. A human body cannot even form an obstacle in the face of AnchoR's might."

RyuZU then lowered her head, whispering,

"Master Naoto. Do you think it is fine even if you do die?"

"Hm? Why do you ask?"

Naoto merely chuckled lightheartedly, and answered,

“That’s not it, RyuZU. I’m betting my life here, but I don’t want to die at all. I don’t intend to sacrific your life, RyuZU, and I don’t intend to abandon AnchoR>’

The golden eyes looked down, and RyuZU sighed,

She shook her head.

“That is an impossible luxury. Honestly put, it is a foolish, reckless act.”

“Well, maybe that’s true. For some reason however, I don’t think I’ll fail.”

The gray eyes blinked a few times, and Naoto declared,

“Yeah—I won’t die. AnchoR won’t kill me, and also, I believe that you’ll definitely do it. Besides—”

She lost a weapon.

That meant that she had fewer options left. Lowered were the number of attacks, choices of evading, and minimum limit of damage allowed—in other words, RyuZU chances of survival.

But even so—

“There is no—problem.”

RyuZU lit her red eyes as she spun the clock.

She got faster, speedy, quicker—and more nimble!

She controlled her body. She dominated time and space. She managed how the battle went. She was able to do all that, and she understood that she would win if she could do those.

Thanks to the massive interference in space, she lost a weapon, but managed to gain distance.

It was merely a small amount of time, less than a fraction in this imaginary time—but even so, that was undoubtedly a chance.

RyuZU looked at AnchoR, and jumped back. The latter continued to give chase.

It was meaningless to consider the capabilities or differences in combat ability.

For her master, for Naoto said that she could do it.

For Naoto said that he believed in RyuZU's abilities, so RyuZU believed in herself.

And more than anyone else, RyuZU herself believed in her little sister.

—Her master did say.

"But—**AnchoR can't kill humans.** Isn't that right?"

RyuZU could not deny those words.

She merely asked without changing her expression.

"…But that child is currently being controlled"

"But she's still trying her best to resist."

With unfaltering eyes, Naoto stared at RyuZU's eyes, and concluded.

"The proof is that Anchor didn't attack Marie or me in the underground. She was always attacking you and uncle Halter."

"She probably prioritized those of a higher threat level."

"That may be true."

Naoto heartily agreed, but he immediately shook his head,

"But I don't think that's a case. I'm confident about that. To prove that, I'm willing to bet my life to save AnchoR."

And besides Naoto continued,

"That kid did say that she wants her big sister to save her."

"—"

"AnchoR can't hurt humans, so if you use me as a shield to create an opening, you'll definitely be able to use that opportunity to destroy that mask, right?"

Now that he asked this…RyuZU did not reply.

Based on logical thinking, RyuZU was unable to accept Naoto's plan as it was too risky. However, she could not lie and say that it was impossible.

That was why she was silent.

And Naoto smiled, seemingly having expected that, and said to RyuZU,

"Hm, well—this is an order, RyuZU. We're to use me as a shield to save your little sister."

—At this point, it was meaningless for her to hesitate.

She gauged the distance.

And affirmed herself, behind her, the still pursuing AnchoR, and the timing.

The latter, giving chase as she ripped through the contorted space, was just like a little comet.

"AnchoR."

RyuZU called out,

“I believe in you.”

She could not see the face of her little sister, covered by the mask.

Only the silhouette, now the embodiment of destruction, closing in.

The simulation was complete. She had the plan drawn up.

RyuZU smiled, and slowed down slightly.

That alone caused her to be within AnchoR’s striking distance, and the latter raised the massive right claw.

The one hit that could destroy anything came swinging.

At that moment—RyuZU jumped up.

It was not actually a dodge; at this distance and timing, where time still stood, the one swing woul have crushed RyuZU’s body completely.

However—that would be if AnchoR had continued to maintain her acceleration.

The instance RyuZU jumped up, AnchoR saw the thing behind her, and immediately froze.

She slowed down greatly.

The heat strong enough to contort space vanished like a furnace that was put out due to its fuel exhausted.

In other words—she was perfectly still in this imaginary time.

RyuZU curled her lips alluringly.

“You—really worked hard there.”

She praised as she swung her scythe.

A black scythe grazed past AnchoR’s mask like numerous slashes.

She stopped the gears from spinning, severed the circuits, and utterly disintegrated the mask, not sparing even a single screw.

Finally, she knocked aside the massive claw dangling above **the blond girl's head**, and muttered,

"But it is time for you to rest. Master Naoto shall repair you immediately.

—Normal time had resumed.

And AnchoR's body was sent flying, overwhelmed by the rampant power within her.

●

Naoto and Marie could not observe what happened in the Imaginary time.

And thus, what they could only understand where the booms, winds and impacts, the destructive scars that utterly damaged the carpark, RyuZu with her spring run out, and a thoroughly wounded AnchoR sent playing.

The little girl body hit the wall hard, and Naoto shrieked,

"Woah!? AnchoR!!"

He hurriedly scampered over, carrying that lifeless body.

Bluntly put, AnchoR was in a terrible state. She reverted back from the black devilish look to the white girl, but her body clearly showed severe damages.

It was as if she was hit by an incoming trucker. Either that, or she was smashed badly by a gigantic hammer.

In fact, it was due to the explosion caused by the sudden cessation of power output, similar to how an engine that was indefinitely accelerated

was forcibly shut down. The energy capable of ripping the Imaginary time apart hit AnchoR herself,

"Ah…th-the insides are still working…thank goodness."

Naoto heaved a sigh of relief. He pricked his ears to listen in on AnchoR, making sure that the functions within were running normally…

Marie nodded,

"Anyway, go wind RyuZU's spring for now. I'll do some emergency repairs in the meantime."

"O-okay, I'll leave it to you, Marie…!"

And Marie made use of the time RyuZU restarted as she got down to repairing AnchoR

But even so, she was unable to do much.

She merely did some simple checks on the body, and stopped the parts that were causing burden on her body. If she were to actually repair it, she would need the equipment at the workshop at Naoto's ears.

After the preliminary treatment, Marie let out a little sigh,

"…But I can't actually believe that we actually did it. To be honest, I really couldn't believe that RyuZU would agree to the plan to use Naoto as the shield…"

That RyuZU definitely would not have agreed to endanger Naoto.

That was not just what Marie thought; that should actually be the case in the first place.

Of course, an automata would not disobey a master's orders, but RyuZU was not restrained by such a natural restraint. When necessary, she could ignore Naoto's orders.

But even so, that was the reality.

"…That is all because I believe in Master Naoto."

A cold voice could be heard from behind.

Marie turned back to look, and found RyuZU, now with her spring winded, standing there.

"Master Naoto is a exceptional person beyond that of an ordinary human—and this Master Naoto has said that he believes in me. Thus, I had a duty to repay his belief. Also, since Master Naoto indicated that he believes in AnchoR too, I have to believe in my little sister no matter what."

And thus, the result was a huge success.

AnchoR was injured badly, but she was repaired. They managed to win in a battle they absolutely had no chance of winning, achieved their objective, and attained a sufficient result.

Naoto believed in RyuZU and AnchoR, RyuZU believed in Naoto, and both RyuZU and AnchoR risked their lives to repay his trust.

Marie earnestly felt that it was a beautiful thing.

"…Yeah, the relationship between you two is nice. I stand corrected."

"I am grateful that you are willing to accompany us, Master Marie Yes, trust is one thing, but there is also doubt in reality. I should have prepared some **failsafe** after all."

"…Hm? It's strange hearing you say such a discreet hing?"

Marie tilted her head slightly in, not realizing at all that in the time she did not recognize, how she was mere millimeters away from dying.

At this moment, Naoto, having taken off the earphones, spoke up softly,

"Oh…?"

"What's the matter? What did you hear?"

"It's nothing, just that I heard something very shocking from the underground…looks like we have a winner here. The sound of that massive weapon's stopped."

"Now that's good news. Our efforts in starting that big event's not wasted here."

Having said this, Marie stood up,

"Now then, let's get moving first. We need to hurry up and get AnchoR back to the workshop for repairs."

●

—I'm so sleepy

The girl wandered in the sweet white mist, or maybe swimming in it.

Perhaps she was even flying.

Everything felt very vague to her; unsettled, vague, ambiguous—but even so, the light floating in front of her eyes were flashing, as certain as the warmth in her chest.

—What's going on?

She once had such a feeling at a certain time and place.

After wondering about it for a little, the girl immediately got an answer. It was simple.

That was when she was born.

When she was born in a pure white room that was very warm and seemingly very interested; it was that sort of a feeling.

There were a few people around, saying very pleasant things to her.

—But it was weird.

She could not remember what exactly did she say back then.

She was very amused to hear it, and it was delightful and addictive, yet why could she not recall it?

The girl felt an abrupt anguish, and had a little urge to cry.

At that moment,

She heard some voices that felt nostalgic for some reason.

"—That's why I say it has to be like this!"

"Stop kidding around with me here! The imaginary function back then and now this eternal function!? How do you expect me to repair this thing—you want to fight against this universe!?"

"Ahh, seriously, I sad that part doesn't need to be repaired! Isn't there an escapement that reduces friction to zero? Just adjust the gears meshing that part!"

"Do you mind telling me how do you mesh something with zero friction!?"

—The voices felt so nostalgic, yet she did not know them.

But even so, her mind became warm for some reason, and she got a little happy.

And so, the girl realized that a certain thing was meshed together correctly, a mass of energy that could be seemingly scooped out and eaten spreading from deep within her chest.

"Ehh!! I might as well do this myself! Just give me the screwdriver!"

"Huh!? Wh-what are you doing!? I'm scared just looking at what you're doing! Who even holds it in such an absurd manner, hey, are you going to destroy it!?"

"It's because you're dragging your feet with this, Marie!"

"Nnn—yu…whatever! Just instruct me on what part to deal with here. I'll do as you instruct here."

"I said already it's the 3 manouevres on the right of the 40,325,831st common circuit!?"

"Where do I start counting to get that number anyway!? I'll really hang you if you don't act reasonably here!"

—It's really nostalgic

The strength spread all over her body, and the original vague thing gradually became clear.

First, she recalled her name. AnchoR. Yes, that was the one thing she could recall. That was the name she had when she was born, when everyone celebrated her birth.

That was an important—name and oath.

"Anyway! What's with this structure that's so meaningless, incomprehensible and unidentifiable!"

"Now then, I shall explain this in a way your pathetic brain can understand, Master Marie."

The girl blinked.

She knew this voice. Surely, it was her older sister's voice. It was truly a very nostalgic voice, and she could clearly recall the voices of her family. The voices of her most beloved, treasured people.

"AnchoR here has a 'Perpetual Gear', which in other words means that she can obtain energy from the automatically spinning spring, allowing her to move without any loss. This energy is all converted to heat, and stored within this cube. AnchoR's space manipulation and weapon storage, summoning are all done through this infinite heat. Her actual function is basically the 'Perpetual Gear' only. Do you understand?"

"I don't understand! You mind telling me the theory behind it!?"

"…Master Naoto. Master Marie's incompetence is way beyond my estimation. Please provide the explaination."

"—Basically, there's such a thing."

"I don't want to accept such an explanation!!!

The instant she had that notion, AnchoR opened her eyes.

There were 3 faces in front of her.

One of them was a face she knew. She always had a smile, but it was obvious she was concerned. That would be her eldest sister, RyuZU.

As for the other two…

“Morning, AnchoR? You feeling alright?”

“—There should be no problems. Probably, I guess.”

“You really aren’t so sure here, self-proclaimed genius. Well, it is a rare fact to have you admit that AnchoR’s structure is beyond your capabilities.”

They were faces and voice she did not know.

But even so, the impression they had on her began to overlap with the important memories in her mind for some reason.

AnchoR was about to speak up, but she hesitated a little.

She was a little worried as to how she was to address them.

—Ahh.

The answer came immediately.

She knew of the most earnest, wonderful greeting.

"—Papa, mama, sister…good morning…"

…And for some reason…

The instant she said this, the trio staring closely at her had their faces frozen.

●

At a place rather close to Akihabara, Conrad and company had set up a hiding place.

There was a workshop filled with ample equipment over there, and after moving the wrecked AnchoR over there, Marie and Naoto spent 3 hours repairing her.

AnchoR was finally restarted successfully, but after hearing her first words

The faces of Naoto, Marie and RyuZU cringed at that instance.

"…I guess AnchoR's repairs did fail after all. Ahh, I did emphasis not to let Master Marie handle the repais."

RyuZU lamented in an exaggerated manner, and Marie lashed out at her,

"Shut up, you there! Do you understand how I feel right now!? Why of all people do I have to be a couple with this pervert here!? This is the first time I had such a humiliation in my life!"

On the other hand, Naoto knelt down halfway to meet AnchoR's eyes, and spoke with a gentle voice,

"AnchoR, you hear me~? Hear~ this carefully, okay~? This big brother~ here doesn't have such poor tastes. My bride is decided to be RyuZU. Understand? I have good tastes, right?"

But the one cause, AnchoR tilted her head, stunned, as she asked,

"Papa…I can't call you that?"

Naoto broke into a huge grin, and shook his head,

"No no no, listen carefully, AnchoR. You can call me that, no problems at all. Yeah. To be honest, I'm really so happy to hear you call me papa that I'm shaking."

"Woah!?"

Marie groaned, looking as if she just saw a cockroach that was accidentally crushed.

But Naoto ignored Marie's reaction as he continued,

"But this one, you want to call this one mama? I'll end up being a couple with this one here, and that'll be really surprising, right? My bride here is RyuZU, and I'll really get a nightmare if I'm to be associated with this protein-based, feral, foul-tempered girl. You understand that~?"

"—You know that I'm the one to have a nightmare here, right? Even if I do want to find another man to play with, you're the last one I'll choose!"

"…?"

I don't know what I did wrong here? AnchoR tilted her head, shook it, and scampered towards Marie, embracing her tightly.

Naoto let out a shriek as he hollered,

"Ahh!! You're sneaky, Marie. I'm envious, let's swap!!"

"Shut up. Don't approach me, you pervert!"

Marie glared at Naoto heinously as she frowned.

AnchoR's face, now rid of the mask, resembled a young tender girl no matter how one looked at it.

A simple inspection would show that her functions were running. Her expressions lacked change, and her vocabulary and logical thinking were a little lacking. Most probably, it was her personality setting at work.

But it was a little weird seeing her being so clingy without the master identification done.

The concept of an automata having 'parents' was strange in itself, let alone 'imprinting', and one had to wonder what sort of a joke it was?

Marie continued to embrace AnchoR as she asked RyuZU,

"What's going on? Does she have a circuit that makes her think that ones repairing her are her parents? It's one thing to be a cheap automata, but will an Initial-Y series actually make use of such a crude master identification?"

"…No, this has nothing to do with master identification. It seems it was caused by an erratic memory."

RyuZU scowled as she emphasized,

"You hear, AnchoR? It is enough for you to call Master Naoto papa, for that one here is just a side bonus."

"Hey, you."

"In other words, she is one of the tools for Master Naoto to use. You understand?"

RyuZU ignored Marie's protests as she explained this reminder,

—However,

AnchoR continued to cling onto Marie tightly, tilting her head as she asked,

"…I can't?"

"~~~~Uu!!! It's not like you can't! You can call her that if you like, AnchoR! I don't mind at all!! Yeah, endure that little bit, mama!!"

"GYYAAHHH!!!? Stop saying such disgusting things, you pervert!?"

"BWAH!!?"

Naoto was about to embrace AnchoR along with Marie, only to be sent flying back from a sharp swinging kick from Marie.

And as she watched Naoto writhe on the floor in pain, RyuZU looked stunned as she said,

"Master Naoto, I shall advise you not to dote too much. There is a need to be strict when the time comes for it, no?"

"This is really weird after all! Can't you think of something!?"

Marie yelled out a shriek, and grabbed AnchoR's shoulders as she tried to pull her distance.

But unexpectedly, AnchoR looked up at Marie's face,

"Mama…?"

"I said already that I'm not your…"

She was left speechless.

"…"

Marie stared at the face of the tender girl that continued to look up at her.

There was no extraordinary expression shown on that face, but…

"—!"

…Uu, so cute!

"No no, don't get emotional here! Get back to normal!"

She hurriedly shook her head to change her thinking. She would end up like that pervert. She could not allow herself to commit this ridiculous shame where one would suspect if she had the right to live on.

Marie thought of a way to counter it, and immediately said,

"Anyway, let's finish the master identification. This strange imprinting here may be cured b that."

If an override of her recognition was done, she could at least use a master's authority to order a change in formal address, even if it was not perfect."

"…I see. We cannot allow this to drag on."

And then, RyuZU faced the girl that continued to cling onto Marie, gently calling her name,

"AnchoR."

"…? What's the matter, sister?"

"I want to be sure of something. Right now, you do not have any master registered, right?"

Yes. AnchoR nodded.

"Very good. Now then, AnchoR, I have a suggestion—"

At this point, RyuZU grabbed Naoto, still rolling on the floor in pain, by the collar, *guuh* and brought his face right in front of AnchoR while ignoring Naoto's voiceless groans.

"I want to make an introduction. This is Master Naoto Miura, currently my master. Do you have any intention to register him as your master?"

Stunned, AnchoR tilted her head.

She approached Naoto's suffering face, and asked,

"—Papa, you want to be my master?"

"Oh—? Ohh, I do I do! Yes yes super duper yes!"

Naoto affirmed AnchoR's question, and raised his hands to indicated his intense desire.

"—Un, I understand."

Once AnchoR said that, she nodded and left Marie.

At that moment.

The already stoic looking AnchoR erased all signs of her will.

The light in the red eyes gradually vanished, becoming dull-looking glass eyeballs as they captured Naoto's profile.

"…!?"

Shocked, Naoto gasped.

AnchoR did not make any reaction to that as she silently spoke,

"Master identification condition—question: 'what am I'?"

The automatic voice was extremely robotic, monotonous as it asked.

Once he witnessed this change, Naoto and Marie looked over at RyuZU.

And the latter took their stares as she nodded,

"This is the formal master recognition procedure for AnchoR. If you can provide the correct answer, you will be officially recognized as a master—though nobody had answered it till this day."

Maybe, Marie asked,

"RyuZU, do you know the answer?"

"Yes, I do."

RyuZU continued unflinchingly as she nodded, and said,

"But I suppose it is meaningless to ask me that question. To use the words you said before, Master Marie, this is not a 'crude master identification' that allows cheating."

"…"

"Also, a second challenge is not permitted. For anyone, there is only one chance to answer—if the answer is wrong, the next answer will not be accepted even if it is correct."

…I see. Marie nodded.

"So that's why that 'mask' was used."

Marie had been skeptical as to why the master identification was skipped, and that they had to use that device that faked the recognition as if it was passed. Finally, she got an answer.

"So it's just because the master identification wasn't passed? Looking at a prior instance like RyuZU, I'm really wondering if she'll obey the orders unconditionally just because of the identification…"

But even so, she could not just let things stand like this.

Marie turned her head to look at Naoto.

"You can't get this answer wrong, Naoto. Got to be careful here—"

But—

Before Marie's warning was taken to heart, Naoto had already looked at AnchoR right in the eyes, simply replying,

"—AnchoR's a cute girl, right? If I use common sense."

"At least listen to what others have to say, you!?"

Marie screamed and hollered at Naoto, but the latter merely laughed it off, saying,

"What nonsense are you saying now? Isn't the answer extremely obvious here? AnchoR's a pretty loli here. What other answer is there? Ah, a little sister type?"

…This one's a lost cause. Got to hurry and think of something here…

Marie groaned as she looked up at the sky. This idiot actually answered this extremely important question with his inner desires so unabashedly.

"…No, calm down, Marie. Naoto's the only one who failed. I haven't answered yet. There should be another chance…"

Marie cupped her head as she grumbled quietly to herself.

And at that moment.

"—Recognition completed."

And along with this stoic voice, the light was reignited in AnchoR's eyes.

"…Huh?"

Stunned, Marie widened her eyes.

"Alright!"

Naoto energetically gave a victory pose, and RyuZU beside him nodded in satisfaction.

"It is truly wonderful to be successful. This is to be expected of you, Master Naoto. An instant answer, outstanding."

"Wait, ehh!? What's with that correct answer!?"

"I suppose there is no need to ask what is the problem here, Master Marie, for it is as you just saw. Master Naoto's answer is the master recognition code, and that is all."

…No no no.

Marie shook a hand, indicating her utter disbelief,

"Normally thinking, the answer to such a question will be the 'design objective' based on the functions, or a message 'Y' left behind, right?"

That answer that was instinctively made by this pervert was actually the correct answer, and nobody had managed to answer it correct for years. Was such a thing possible…?

But RyuZU seemed to be mocking Marie's words as she said,

"Well, I guess ordinary people who think of themselves as geniuses are only able to think that much. The so-called truth is simply that simple, and only with true wisdom are able to see through it."

"But even so, the answer's…'a girl'?"

"Amongst us sisters, AnchoR is the only child created as a 'weapon'. The infinite violence of the Perpetual gear; this is the 'design objective' of AnchoR However, do you think it is fine for such a person to pass the master recognition just with that answer?"

"This is…"

Marie was speechless, and RyuZU sneered as she continued,

"And if I may be so unsophisticated as to quip, the answer Master Naoto gave, recognizing AnchoR as a 'girl', is a show that he truly understood 'Y's message."

She paused.

"To obtain infinite violence, there is a need to have a will that is unwilling to use violence. That is how it is."

"…"

"AnchoR, or anchor, means an added restraint of the power. If you look at the meaning of the name given for this girl, I suppose the answer is not that illogical."

She could not refute that argument.

Marie turned to Naoto, and felt a little suspicious as she asked,

"Did…you even think that much into this when you answered, Naoto?"

Once she asked this, Naoto was flabbergasted.

"Eh? Of course not."

—I guess.

Marie merely closed her eyes slightly, and in front of her, Naoto spread his arms wide, praising,

"AnchoR is this wonderful, amazing piece of art you see, so sexy here, an automata so cute the body is writhing in pain no? Even with those ridiculous weapons equipped on her, so what? Isn't that similar to RyuZU?"

While Naoto continued to rattle on, a voice coldly rang from behind,

"—How audacious of you to commit infidelity with my little sister, Master Naoto."

"Eh—ah, no, that's not it! It's true that my bride here's RyuZU! It's a different thing from this though—yeah, I just think of AnchoR as my daughter!"

RyuZU's eyes lost their lustre.

"You actually lust after your daughter…it seems you are increasingly beyond hope…"

"…Ah, are you jealous? You're cute there, Miss RyuZU."

The next instance, RyuZu smacked Naoto down onto the floor.

And at that moment,

AnchoR, who remained silent till this point, spoke up,

"—Please give a command."

●

"…?"

Naoto gave a skeptical look, and got up from the ground.

Once she took Naoto's stare, AnchoR repeated,

"—Please give a command."

"AnchoR?"

"Yes—this unit is the 4th unit of the Initial-Y series, 'Trishula' AnchoR. Master Naoto Miura, recognized—please give a command."

Although it was not so much as an automated voice, it was an extremely monotonous reply.

The emotionless expression and tone were no different from before, but one could no longer sense from AnchoR the tender, childish girl personality.

Naoto frantically turned back, yelling,

"RyuZU! That doesn't seem right here! Is there something wrong with AnchoR!?"

"So the answer's wrong after all…"

Marie muttered, and Naoto growled,

"Ack! You gotta be kidding me here! What other answer do you think there is here!?"

"No—AnchoR's functions are normal, Master Naoto."

RyuZU answered, and Naoto turned his head towards her,

"—Ugh, what's going on here then?"

"It's simple. In this state—AnchoR, having passed the master recognition, is not allowed to have 'free will'."

All emotions vanished from Naoto's face, and he turned to meet RyuZU,

"What does that mean?"

"I did mention it before, that AnchoR is the only child created to be a 'weapon'. If she has a will beyond that of her master's, she is not considered to be a 'weapon'. Thus, when AnchoR is set to have a master, she loses her free will."

"…Then, what did you just say about a will not to use violence?"

"Everything is to be left to the master, including this. This is AnchoR."

While Naoto showed no attempts in hiding his rage, RyuZU plainly told him this.

Marie then interrupted,

“Wait. In that case, what’s AnchoR’s state if she doesn’t have the master identification completed?”

“When AnchoR is yet to have a master, she has the free will to find a suitable master to control her combat ability. In terms of use however, there is a big limitation.”

“What limitation?”

“Simply, AnchoR cannot kill or hurt humans.”

…I see. Marie nodded.

Without a master, the safety function would be activated according to ‘AnchoR’s will’, but when a suitable master was found, she would fulfill the function as a pure ‘weapon’.

That was the setting that was embedded within AnchoR.

“…Well, common sense did go out of the window when automatas do have free will, so considering this, I have to say this system is decent…”

“—Decent? What do you mean by that joke here!!”

Naoto yelled agitatedly.

“I saved AnchoR not because I wanted a ‘weapon’! You knew this would happen, RyuZU. Why didn’t you tell me this!?”

“…Master Naoto.”

Upon seeing the glaring expression Naoto showed, RyuZU lowered her eyes, and gently whispered,

“I knew that you would be enraged. However, did you actually forget? Both AnchoR and I are automatas.”

“…”

“I understand very well that you have the personal belief, and that you love AnchoR and me for having free will, but we are not humans. We have the ‘inherent functions’, we have a clear specific ‘design objective’, and we have an unyielding ‘mission’. We wish for a master to fulfill our functions, and to determine our raison d’etre.”

“But, in that case, RyuZU…!”

“I live as the ‘Yourslave’. It is to be expected that I am different from AnchoR, created to be the ‘Trishula’.”

“_”

At that instance, Naoto wanted to scream…but did not do so.

He merely bit his lips, endured as he lowered his head, and whispered,

“But even so, what am I supposed to do now?”

“Master Naoto, I believe that you will be able to treat AnchoR well.”

“…”

Naoto did not answer.

He lowered his head, looked in front, and clenched his fists.

Upon seeing him look so dejected, Marie called him tentatively,

“Naoto…?”

“—I’m pissed here.”

“Huh?”

Naoto lifted his face.

He frowned hard, and glared at RyuZU, Marie and AnchoR in turn, before saying,

"…I just feel very pissed. How can such a thing happened. You say that a girl doesn't need that sort of will, just because she's an automata. Now I'm really angry hearing that! I'm the master, and the master's orders are absolute, so listen to me and obey."

RyuZU quickly answered,

"Right now, AnchoR is 100% committed to fulfilling your will, Master Naoto."

"That's not it! It's true now, but I don't have any intention of that! Ahh, enough already! Anyway, papa won't recognize this AnchoR now!"

Marie could not bear this any longer as she raised her voice,

"Please calm down already. You're just rambling away now, you know?"

"Shut up, you idiot."

Naoto snapped back, and again faced AnchoR>

He stared right at those red eyes, and called her name,

"AnchoR."

The weapon calmly answered,

"Yes—please give a command."

"What do you want to do, AnchoR?"

Naoto asked.

The weapon immediately stopped, and answered,

"—Error, commands unspecified. Requesting for more details."

Naoto continued to ask,

"AnchoR, I want you to tell me what do you want to do?"

"Yes—to fulfill the role of the 'Trishula' AnchoR as appropriately possible."

The weapon clearly answered.

And from behind, RyuZU calmly said to Naoto,

"Master Naoto, if I may remind you, AnchoR now has no free will."

"She does."

Naoto simply concluded.

And RyuZU silently asked,

"What makes you think that way?"

"If AnchoR does not have free will, I would have been killed a long time ago. She should have been resisting all the time when she was controlled by the 'mask'."

There was the 'strange noise' coming from AnchoR when she was controlled, and that was not just the grinding of the machinery.

That 'strange noise' proved that AnchoR had a will.

Naoto recalled that voice, he recalled that anguished cry.

That was the basis of his conclusion.

He stared at the girl in front of him, and continued,

"You said that was your 'mission', isn't it, AnchoR?"

"Yes."

"Other than that, what else do you like to do and want to do, AnchoR?"

"Yes—for specific recognition, is this a request to reveal information about AnchoR's free will?"

"Yes! What do you wish for with your free will, AnchoR?"

"Yes—answering now. This machine's free will is currently in a frozen state."

"Okay. Now this is my command. Remove it."

Naoto said it so leisurely, and after a short pause, the weapon continued,

"..Yes—for specific recognition, do you wish for this machine to act on its own will?"

"I mean I want you to act on your free will, AnchoR."

"Yes—is this a command to remove all limiters?"

"Well, I guess that's the case?"

"Meaning that all emotional circuits are opened, thawing free thinking process, allowing permission to provide views—"

"Yes yes! All of that's correct. Your own will, AnchoR!"

—Afterwards.

Naoto's ears could hear the countless gears in AnchoR's body meshing together again.

That was the signal of the rules being changed.

The sound of the fate that was dealt being turned around.

AnchoR's eyes flickered right in front of Naoto's vision.

Her lips were quivering, and she let out a voice,

She asked,

"…I can do anything, I want?"

"Of course."

Naoto answered without hesitation.

"…Really?"

"Of course."

After hearing the decisive answer, AnchoR's eyes were looking around.

While she was tentatively wondering if she should say it, feeling lost,

No emotions were on her face, and only her stare and voice showed conveyed some anxiety as she said,

"…I wish, to allow allowed."

"Eh?"

"…I wish, I can be allowed…to cry."

"That's…"

Marie wondered if she misheard that. She did not understand what AnchoR meant by whether she could cry.

But Naoto immediately nodded back.

He gently patted AnchoR's face, and permitted her,

"You can cry."

AnchoR's face was completely contorted.

Her red eyes showed large beads of tears, and soon, they began to drip down her.

"…I hope, to do something else."

"Yes."

"Can I, touch you…?"

“Of course.”

Naoto nodded, and AnchoR took a step forward, tentatively touching Naoto’s chest.

AnchoR continued to ask,

“Can I, apologize…?”

“There’s nothing to apologize about, but you can do so.”

Naoto permitted, and AnchoR immediately buried her face in Naoto’s chest, sobbing.

She continued to cry as she choked on her words, repeating ‘sorry’ over and over again.

It was a soft whimper at first, only to gradually become a loud bawling in the end.

Upon witnessing this scene, Marie whispered,

“Hey, RyuZU.”

“What is the matter, Master Marie?”

“I’ll ask you this. Is this according to your plan?”

After saying this, Marie stared at RyuZU right in the eyes.

The former’s eyes seemed to be yearning for the truth, but RyuZU merely smiled ‘as per usual’,

“I did say this beforehand, did I not? I believed that Master Naoto **would be able to treat AnchoR well**.”

Marie took a breath, and her shoulders dropped heavily as she folded her arms and faced RyuZU.

“You really are quite the impudent person, RyuZU.”

“Yes, it is to be expected for people lacking in brains like you to view me as such, Master Marie.”

Unexpectedly, RyuZU did not deny this, and without any gloom, she smiled as she continued,

“I am ‘Yourslave’. I am not designed to be one for many words or lead others. I merely ‘believe’ that Master Naoto does not need my help to find his own truth.”

—In fact.

Naoto did respond to her expectations, and seemingly proud of her master, RyuZU showed a smile.

In response, Marie seemed convinced as she sighed,

“Can I ask you another thing?”

“What is it?”

“I never asked this before—what basis is it that you recognize Naoto as your master?”

Upon hearing that question, RyuZU raised her eyebrows in surprise,

“—Now this is a strange one. I did remember emphasizing it over and over again. No, please pardon me. I did not have any expectations for you, Master Marie, when your feeble memory is as lacking as your chest.”

“—”

While Marie endured her rage silently, RyuZU continued,

“Because amongst the humans who continued to wander pathetically, Master Naoto is the most outstanding of them all.”

She paused, and smiled,

“—And no matter where Master Naoto goes to, I can believe that this is ‘where I should follow to’.”

AnchoR, still sobbing away, continued to whimper in an interrupted manner,

“…I don’t, have to destroy, anything? I don’t have, to kill?”

“Yes, you don’t have to do that!”

Naoto continued to hug the trembling girl as he nodded firmly.

And at that moment,

The cube hanging in front of AnchoR’s chest let out a deep twisting sound.

And at the same time, a large ripple appeared in space.

Over there was the opening leading to the ‘armory’ not belonging to this world.

And so, just like how AnchoR pulled her weapons previously, there was a certain thing popped out from that hole, rolling on the floor of this workshop.

Interlude - 04:30 Out-breaker

"…A cyborg?"

Marie took a little while to realize that it was a human.

It was not because the thing was converted into one through certain means.

But that this thing in front of her was not left in human form.

The thing was completely destroyed, not a single part intact, to a point where there were large holes in him; looking at this devastation, it looked as though his body was completely wasted. The only thing barely left in shape were his head, chest and right arm.

Naoto, hugging AnchoR tightly, widened his eyes in surprise,

"What's with this uncle who looks like he's going to die? And he's still alive?"

"Well, the 6th generation of cyborgs are able to take this much damage at least, but—"

Marie said as she knelt down beside the cyborg that's lying on the floor.

She pried the wreckage apart, checking the remaining structure that was left.

"Hm…though this very unique Royal Oak surely looks like it's made by the Odemas…visually, it doesn't look like it can be bought in the market. Maybe it's a special order that uses secret technology."

"Ahh~ so it's like uncle Halter?"

"I guess so. That thing's the 8th generation model of the Breguets, but if we're looking at how thoroughly damaged this thing is, I guess it fought against masked AnchoR before this…"

Marie glanced aside at the girl in red and white, the latter still clinging to Naoto.

At this point, it seemed she could not ask about anything.

But if she were to deduce from the current situation,

"…I guess he was erased by AnchoR's space manipulation, and 'contained' all this while until just now."

After pondering about it, Marie naturally got down to repair it as per muscle memory.

She ignored the unnecessary parts as she connected the vitals spring and the minimal interface with the brain that was in suspend mode.

Naoto stared at her fluid motions,

"You're able to repair it even after he's this damaged?"

"I just did some emergency repairs to the parts above the head. A little chat would be fine at least."

Marie said as she continued to spin the spring attached to the man's head.

And like a spasm, the man's cyborg body jumped violently.

"—! Ga—!"

The man's eyes opened as he awakened.

The creaking sound was not because he was in pain, but because of the noise caused by the damaged vocal cords.

The spasms of the cyborg quickly stilled, and the parts above the neck began to move smoothly.

After about 10 seconds of waiting the man to calm down, Marie spoke up,

“Hi, you awake?”

“!!—What, in the—”

The cyborg man muttered with a wince.

Marie reached her hand out, and tapped her finger twice in front of the man’s eyes.

“Can you hear me? Who are you? Please tell me your affliation and name.”

“—…”

The man did not answer.

What replaced it was a little turning of the head, and the prosthetic eyes showed Marie’s face.

Those eyes widened, showing a little surprise.

“—Marie Bell Breguet?”

“You’re looking upbeat.”

Marie nodded.

“Ha—so, this is hell?”

“I won’t say that you’re dead yet, but I’m still alive and kicking. This is reality.”

“In other words, we didn’t meet in hell.”

Hmph. The man showed a cynical smile, and said his name,

"Vermouth. Do take care of me, Princess."

Marie stared at him with skepticism.

"Is that your real name? Or just a codename?"

"Of course it's an alias, but I hope you let me off here. Look, what's the use of a real name for mere scrap like me? Isn't it too much for me to wish for?"

"…So you're a secret agent. Affiliated to the Odemas?"

"Well, who exactly do I belong to anyway?"

Vermouth continued to play dumb.

"Well, at least I'm currently unemployed, so actually, there's no reason for me to hide. Scrap themselves do have their own moral codes, so spare me in this regards."

"…Well, whatever. It's not a huge problem anyway."

"May I ask something here? Where am I? What's the day today?"

"This is Grid Akihabara in Japan. It's before dawn, February 8th."

Marie answered, and Vermouth seemed to be rather surprised as he frowned.

"Hm…February 8th in Tokyo? I still can't completely understand why I'm still alive till this point..but this means that everything I planned went better than I expected?"

Marie titled her head as she asked,

"…? What do you mean by that?"

"If you're here, this means that you received the transmission that's sent to a ghost as a recipient, right?"

At that instant, Marie's face took a similar form to that of a *Hannya*.

"—Ahh, so you're the one I'm looking for? Are you the suicidal idiot who sent me that shitty joke of a message?"

"That's the case. You would pursue me to the depths of hell just because of that sort of taunt. To be expected of the rumored violent Princess of the Breguets. Well, it looks like you did better than what I expected, better than expected."

"Ahahaha—how daring you are. Are you ready!?"

"Of course. However, there are some unfulfilled urges at least—especially at my age. If you want to be my partner, shake your ass and beg me."

"_"

Marie suddenly stood up, showed a cute angelic smile filled will pure innocence, raised a leg, and slammed it down.

Vermouth's head got grounded by Marie's heel, and the latter said,

"Hey, stupid dog, if you dare say anything after experiencing this massage, I'll chop your head off and flush it down the toilet bowl ♥ ."

Naoto watched this with cold eyes, and spoke up,

"Miss Marie, this uncle here will definitely die, so hold back at little here. This isn't good education for AnchoR, so please do this somewhere else."

"This cyborg's functions are such that he can survive even if a head left; there's no problems here. Also, what sort of education is needed for an automata that's been running for 1000 years?"

Vermouth, who continued to remain under Marie's foot, merely mocked with a belittling tone,

"Anyway, Princess, isn't that underwear of yours too kiddish? How about you just wear something more sexy, or just go commando altogether?"

“You wanna get killed, you bastard!!?”

Marie roared as she stamped him over and over again.

And from outside the room came a deep, hoarse male voice,

“Hey, Milady? What’s with the interrogation sounds coming out from there?”

The door to the room over, and Halter poked his face in, seemingly peeking.

At that instant, Vermouth, who got stamped by Marie, yelled loudly,

“—Are you Vainney Halter?”

“Ah…? Hey, what’s this, Milady? What’s with this young blood who looks like he’s going to kick the bucket?”

Halter answered calmly, and Vermouth curled his lips, saying,

“How cold you are. It’s not much, but I’m your fan. The Scarborough Fair incident is still a talking point in this industry, you know?”

“Scarborough Fair?”

Naoto blankly tilted his head.

“Don’t mind it. It’s an old, moldy story.”

Vermouth showed a thin smile as he said,

“I did feel it was a pity when you took up the job of being the Breguet Princess’ bodyguard, but I felt thankful as well.”

Halter asked in surprise,

“Thankful?”

“That I don’t have to meet a monster like you at my workplace—or so I thought. I never thought we would meet under such circumstances. I guess life really is filled with surprises here.”

“You’re rather noisy for someone left with a head, young blood. Nice guts you have. Shut up if you want to get a signature.”

“If I don’t want a signature, you mind helping me out here? Looks like I’m going to be killed by this Princess.”

“Isn’t this a good scene? Just kick the bucket like that.”

Halter bluntly retorted, and turned to ask Marie,

“Seriously, where did this eyesore of a young blood come from?”

“It seems he was taken in by AnchoR’s space manipulation, and he’s the one who sent us that shitty joke of a transmission. Now I’m thanking you in full.”

Bump Marie’s heel slammed Vermouth’s skull.

Ahh, Halter nodded briefly,

“Isn’t it better to just get killed like that? Anyway, why aren’t you dead yet?”

“Ahh, it looks like AnchoR has a policy of not killing people. Isn’t that the reason here?”

Naoto interrupted while hugging a still sobbing AnchoR.

Vermouth widened his eyes, and asked in terror,

“Hey, isn’t that the Initial-Y series that completely annihilated me?”

“I guess so?—But as I said, she didn’t.”

“Brat, please don’t do this to me.”

Vermouth's face showed a complete incomprehension of Naoto, the latter hugging AnchoR tightly while indicating his thorough ownership of her. His lips twitched as he said,

"What's going on here? Anybody that obeyed her quietly wouldn't have been killed? My name got wiped out entirely. Is it because cyborgs aren't counted as humans?"

"—Hm? I'm curious about that too."

Halter said as he rubbed his chin and looked at AnchoR.

"When we first met, I was one of the attack targets too, right? This annoying young blood's allies were done in, yet he's the only one alive? …What's the basis of that?"

If Vermouth did die, the derived explanation would be that he did not have a biological body.

But in reality, the cyborg Vermouth was stored in the space, and survived.

—In that case, what was the factor that determined whether AnchoR would kill?

In response to Halter's question, Naoto stared blankly into space for a little while, his eyes wandered.

And then, he answered.

"I guess it's more or less…humanity?"

"…Huh?"

After seeing Halter's confused look, Naoto continued,

"Then, uncle, at that time, when you abandoned RyuZU and me, you didn't care about your own death, and just thought of how to get Marie to escape, right?"

"…"

Halter went silent.

He could not answer. Truly, he recalled.

At that time, he discarded his humanity when he encountered AnchoR.

From a human filled with emotions to a soldier ready to fight. He changed his mind to that of a machine.

That was the most basic of skills he learned to survive; the Mindset. There was nothing he could spare himself from doing on the battlefield. That meant that all choices were equal, and thus, he had to decide a course of action through the most logical decision. In this sense, emotions would be an obstacle.

Halter's mission was to protect Marie Bell Breguet.

If he were able to send her back safely, he would even choose to calmly cast aside Naoto and RyuZU as bait.

And for that matter, naturally—he would even discard his own life.

—As a result, AnchoR did not view Halter as 'human'.

"!!"

He looked down at the floor.

There was Vermouth, who got stomped by Marie. *This guy probably reverted from being a soldier to a human when he thought of sending the mail to Marie,* he thought.

What exactly did he intend to do? That sort of action was neither logical nor rational Why would a personnel from another company send such a message to the supposedly-dead Princess of the Breguets?

The ones able to do such a vague action—would surely be humans, of course.

Halter remained silent as he pondered, and Naoto seemed to understand his thoughts as he continued,

"Ah, uncle, I don't have any intention of criticizing you even if I do say so, especially since it's your job. Anyway, I think it's amazing that you're so prepared yourself."

"…Ahh, don't tease me now. Seriously."

After hearing Naoto's words, Halter gave a wry smile.

There were so many things he could say.

Anyway, did Naoto actually grasp his psychological state at that time? Even if Naoto could hear the vibrations of the prosthetics, the brain itself was biological.

—Seriously, what exactly did this brat actually hear that time…?

Halter shrugged his shoulder, and let out a huge, deep sigh,

"…Was my humanity actually doubted and nitpicked by an automata?"

That hurts.

Halter rubbed his bald head as he let out a mutter.

●

5.38am, the Eastern sky began turn white as dawn broke.

Marie looked around the factory,

"Now then, we settled everything in the Central facilities. All possible evidence has been discarded, right?"

She muttered these things she had to affirm before they retreated, and Halter nodded,

"Yes, Master Conrad's term has evacuated. We're the only ones left."

"Yeah, the alibis for all those involved in this incident—"

"Yep, they'll be done—except for Naoto."

Yes, yes, Marie nodded as she turned back with a smiling face,

"Good for you Naoto. Your name will be recorded in the textbooks."

After waiting for that smile to vanish, Naoto answered,

"…Well, it's much more important for RyuZU and AnchoR to be safe, more than anything else. If you think about it, it's impossible for me to carry out such a large scale terrorist act alone, right?"

And RyuZU on standby nearby, seemed pleased as she said,

"Or rather, you may think of it this way. You may finally be able to escape from the foolish constrained society called school, Master Naoto. You finally have a chance to be appraised by the world."

"But I'm the baddest man of the century."

"What value is the subjective view of good and evil from a flea? Only those with merits will understand this very well, no?"

"Papa, you're amazing!"

AnchoR beamed innocently as she leaped into Naoto's arms.

And Naoto immediately broke into a smile,

"This is bad…maybe I've awakened because of this happiness today hehehehe…"

"Don't do stupid things. Retreat now."

Marie coldly told him off.

Halter seemed a little displeased as he knocked the ball that was tucked under his armpit,

“Speaking of which, Princess, is it alright for me to just throw this thing aside?”

“Hey, I’m not just a thing here. Even if I do look this way, I’m a man of much honor. I’ll definitely work well if you get me a new body and repay what I owe.”

The ball—correction, Vermouth, who was left only with the head, let out a little sneer.

His appearance at this point would cause children to cry upon seeing him, and his attitude was extremely brazen.

Marie merely snorted as she said,

“Hm, be prepared to be used well as an antique.”

“Thanks for your kind mercy, Princess—ahh, anyone got a cigarette?”

He frivolously stated his wish, only to be ignored by all that was present.

And then,

At that moment

“Hey, wait a sec.”

Naoto, who’s image had collapsed, let out a sharp voice,

Marie turned her head back, and frowned in surprise,

“What? You forgot something?”

“That’s not it! …Hey, seriously, what’s this sound here—from underground!?”

Naoto let out a shriek.

And immediately afterwards,

Rubbling came from down below, and an intense impact and tremor shook the city.

Everything his eyes could see were tumbling sideways.

Marie was unable to steady her footing, and immediately fell on her butt.

Naoto covered his ears as he rolled on the floor, shrieking; RyuZU and AnchoR immediately stepped forward to look.

"—What's going on here!?"

Marie yelled, but nobody answered.

It was not an earthquake. The tremors and rumbles showed no signs of abating, instead getting progressively stronger.

Even Marie, who did not have the superhuman senses Naoto had, was able to physically sense something climbing up from the underground.

"—You're kidding!!"

Naoto gasped.

"That thing—that giant weapon's rising while destroying the underground!"

"You're kidding!"

Marie shrieked, and Naoto yelled back,

"This isn't something to joke about here!!"

"What's the Tokyo 'army' doing now!? Were they all wiped out!?"

Impossible Marie gritted her teeth.

—Truly, that weapon was a Super-Dreadnought level weapon.

It had numerous cannon ports, and armor even RyuZU's scythe could not cut through.

However, it was just extremely large. There was no chance of it winning in a battle of waves. If the damage below the city and the battle between the giant weapon and the 'army' aren't taken into account, it would be possible to overcome the gigantic weapon even if it was impossible to ensure zero casualty.

That was Marie's initial plan, but—

At that moment, Vermouth, who was left only with the head, yelled frantically.

"Hey, don't tell me the 'army's duking it out against that weapon…!?"

"You're noisy. There aren't other ways of doing this, right!?"

Marie clicked her tongue in a scathing manner as she retorted back,

But Vermouth frowned hard, as if he had a migraine.

"Spare me already, ghost Princess. Did you just ignore the most important thing here!? Are you kidding me!?"

"—What are you saying!?"

"Why did you think I deliberately sent this message through electromagnetic waves. The research in Shiga that violated the International Treaty, the contents of the research that was the reason for the purge; that's electromagnetic technology. Isn't that monster's a mass collection of that technology!?"

Electromagnetic technology.

A past technology that was advanced for its time, but was never used in these current times.

The reason for it to be scrapped was that the electromagnetic waves used would cause the nano-sized gears, widely prevalent in intricate machinery, to malfunction.

—Wait.

Marie felt a chill run down her back, and gasped.

All the countless incidents she heard this entire week appeared in her mind.

I didn't think too much about that There were many of these possible excuses, but—

The purged Grid Shiga.

The forbidden electromagnetic technology research that once occurred there.

The technicians that were exposed and purged without reason, who continued to live on.

And also, the nauseating words the Mie governor said that lingered in Marie's mind.

—The government doesn't know anything. That thing they created isn't just a threat.

That,

That weapon.

The capabilities of that weapon.

"Control electromagnetic fields—is it a giant electromagnet!?"

"—Ahh!?"

At that instant, Naoto pressed down his ears as he let out a shriek.

—All the city functions, and—

Halter, RyuZU, AnchoR, Vermouth…anything that required gear technology.

—Broke out.

●

Gear Era 1016, February 8th, 5.47am.

An earthquake-like tremor roared, creating a massive phenomenon. At that time,

All the people escaping to the center of Grid Akihabara witnessed that scene.

A large trail of blue light pillar permeated through the sky that was breaking dawn.

Following it was an extremely loud rumble. The entire Grid Akihabara was shrieking.

And then, from the place where the pillar of light, like spreading ripple waves, all machinery that was made using clockwork technology gradually ceased to function.

Though a few minutes passed after this, it felt as if 1,2 hours had passed to those who experienced it.

The gigantic iron spider let out a bellow as it devoured the city and appeared.

●

In the dim, cramped room, there was a monitor hanging on a wall, displaying the situation outside and the machine's reports in a hurry, updating.

"It has reached the surface. We're unable to affirm the threat level. Continuing to search for the enemy."

"Main cannon has cooled by 14%, energy recharge at 3%."

"Recalculating time it takes to recharge completely."

He was slumped in his chair, receiving the continual stream of reports, and raised his chin.

The adjutant beside him said, seemingly wanting to affirm,

“If it is as you expected, my Lord, the two units of the Initial-Y series should be here…”

The man who was asked, the old man with graying white hair answered with a lethargic tone,

“…Even if it is ‘Y’s inheritance, they aren’t omnipotent in a still world.”

The glittering metal-colored eyes on his thoroughly wrinkled face stared at the monitor sharply.

And the adjutant, a young bespectacled man man suddenly spoke up solemnly,

“My Lord, may I ask something?”

“Of course. Say it.”

“Yes—My Lord, you retired from active service 3 years ago, and retreated yourself to the underground, didn’t you?”

“Are you unhappy about an old retired man suddenly reappearing at the forefront again?”

“Yes, no, that’s not what I mean at all. It is the ultimate honor to be serving under your command, my Lord. This mere subordinate here just have a single doubt—you were thoroughly opposed to this operation no matter what before this, my Lord. May I ask, why did you decide to return?”

“…So you finally found something you had to ask no matter what.”

“Huh?”

The old man ignored the adjutant’s voice as he narrowed his eyes.

He recalled the encounter underground with the boy.

—He did not have any evidence.

No, there was no need for such a thing.

However, he understood. He had firm belief when he saw that boy and that automata.

—That's 'Y'

Was it reincarnation? Successor? Neither mattered. It was all the same. He had no interest in that.

However—when the boy absolutely denied everything about the world, he insisted that his subjective view was the right one. When the man saw those eyes that had no doubts at all, he was able to instinctively determine that he was the mastermind who caused the current state of the world.

That was just the cruel—yes, the displeasure he had from his inner heart.

The unprecedented hope for the future, the disappointment in history, the despair over the world. Thus, having resigned himself to such fate, he decided it was fine even if his life was to end.

—However, the metal-colored eyes were filled with utmost fury and vengeance.

With a deep, hoarse voice, he muttered,

"Watch it all end like this. You shall know about the wills of us commoners crawling on the surface—you monsters."

Afterword

"…Now then, do you mind explaining the long delay between publications while playing catch?"

–At a certain place and time, the editor-in-charge S asked with his eyes half-opened.

"Hohoho…when did it seem like we're playing catch here–?"

"This is dodgeball. We're using iron balls, huh, hoho."

Kamiya and Himana, battered for some reason, smiled fearlessly.

"The last time, the distance was the obstructing factor, but now that Tsubaki's in Saitama now, I can beat him up whenever I can."

"And thus this is a mystery! This me who returns every beating is still here! Long live the code of Hammurabi!!"

"…Can't both of you get along a little better?"

"It is as you say, but a certain round glasses guy who extolled about world peace had a dispute in a band and caused it to disband, you know?"

This is the result of wanting to eliminate international borders (Role sharing). To the glasses guy in heaven, can you see it?

"To summarise, for anyone like us to see a clear point of compromise, they would have to use sign language (asserts)"

"Yes, this thing called peace is too idealistic. Humans can only understand each other by beating each other up–"

"Well, whatever. The result of no publication is that you'll be in financial trouble, you know?"

""War leaves only debts behind. (serious looks)""

In response to the editor-in-charge's words, the two men with swollen faces nodded in unison.

"…I just thought of it."

–And Shino, who had been watching on till this point, spoke up.

"It's about a certain work of Mr Kamiya at another company. I think Mr S is the one in charge of promotion, commercialization and contract signing with Mr Kamiya's wife. Also, it seems Mr S noticed that there are moves for an anime adaptation…is it because you know of how busy Mr Kamiya is that you don't intend to release Clockwork Planet?"

–He noticed something he should not have.

In the midst of this silence, the editor-in-charge S was the only one to continue on leisurely.

"I see. Looks like I have no choice but to collect the manuscript. I'll like to have the 3rd volume earlier, okay?"

As they watch him stand up to leave with a heinous smirk, Kamiya and Tsubaki stood up to roar,

"Hey, wait, editor-in-charge! We could have finished this earlier if I wasn't so busy, right?"

"Aren't you the source of all evil who made Kamiya 'so busy' that he can't return back to writing!?"

And then, both of them exchanged handshakes with fiendish smirks, just like a mirror.

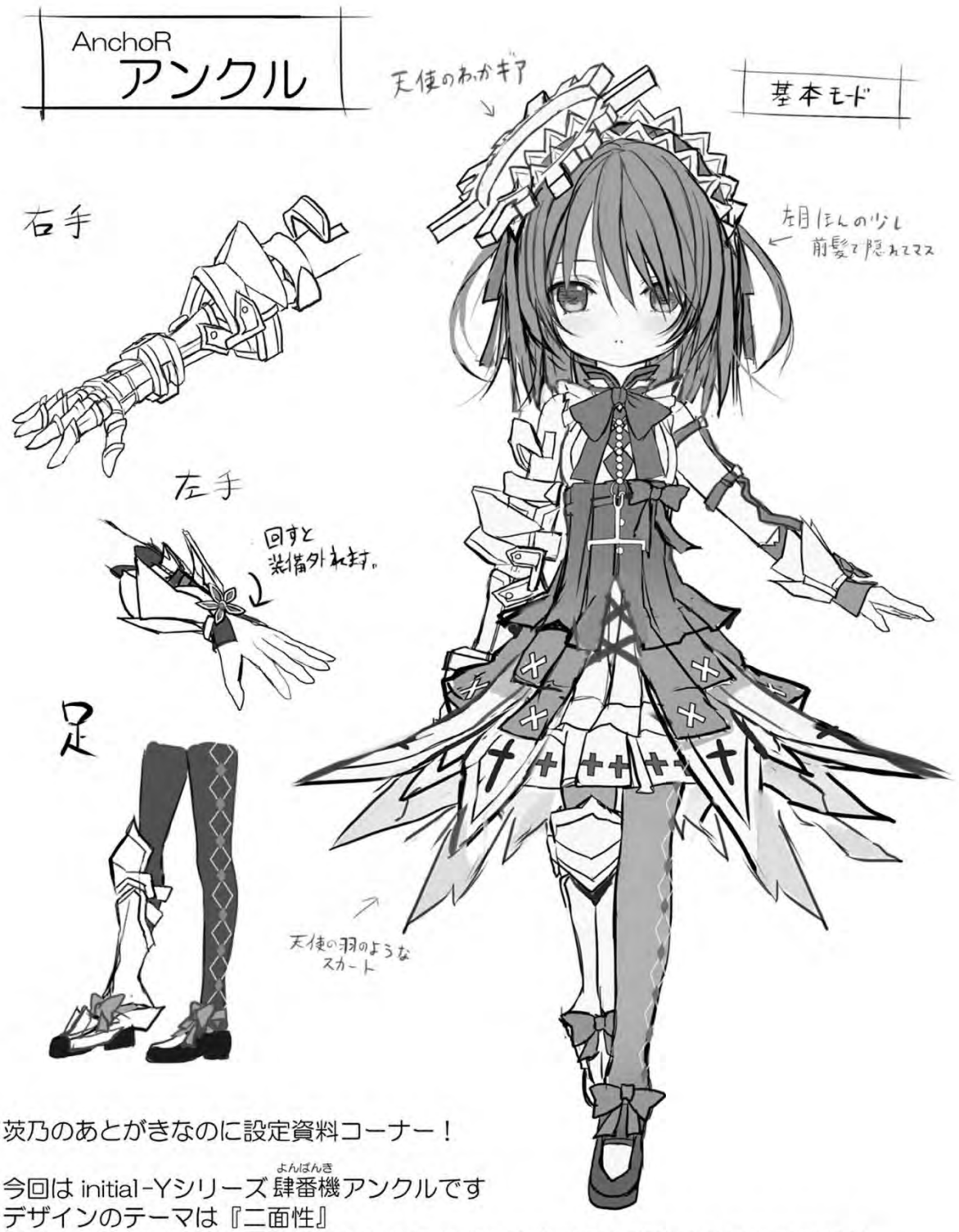
""Let us kill off the mastermind behind this war♥""

And with a common goal, both of them chased after the editor-in-charge at full speed.

…Shino watches the trio quickly disappear, and nod deeply.

“I see. So conspiracies do exist after all, huh~”

–Yes, world peace is still a distant thing. He muttered in his heart



茨乃のあとがきなのに設定資料コーナー！

今回は initial-Yシリーズ肆番機（よんばんき）アンクルです
デザインのテーマは『二面性』
服装の左右非対称や変身前は天使な外見なのに変身すると悪魔のような外見など
いろいろな所でこだわってます。アンクル自身は天使なのでそこはぶれないですが(笑
今回暴れまくった絶対時間アンクルなのですが、実はあれ真の姿ではありません。
近いうちにお披露目するかもなのでそれまでお楽しみに！